Dumgral’dur

Jan Lavrinovski

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Contents

Stonebrook.....1

Dumgral'dur.....14

A Hunt.....27

A Honest Way.....59

Enemies within.....155

In the Depths.....164

Stonebrook

The dwarf trudged through the thick underbrush, boots sinking slightly into the damp, loamy earth. His short, sturdy frame moved with the quiet determination of one who had traveled far, eyes sharp beneath a thick brow that shaded them from the dappled sunlight filtering through the dense canopy. The scent of pine resin and damp moss clung to the air, rich and ancient. Birds chattered in the treetops, oblivious to the lone traveler who wove his way through the towering oaks and gnarled evergreens.

With each step, the trees began to thin, the deep greens of the forest giving way to a vast, golden plain stretching beyond the treeline. There, a small river cut through the land like a silver thread, its waters flowing clear and crisp from the mountains in the distance. The peaks loomed dark against the sky. A cool wind drifted down from the heights, carrying with it the scent of stone and ice, of distant storms yet to break.

The dwarf took it all in, eyes narrowing slightly as he adjusted the weight of the tools strapped to his back—an axe, a hammer, a sack of iron nails clinking softly as he moved. This was a good place, a strong place. The river would provide water, the forest wood, and the mountains protection from the worst of the world's cruelties. He exhaled slowly, a rare glint of satisfaction in his otherwise grim expression.

Wildflowers dotted the grass at the river's edge, their colors bright against the green expanse of the plain. Purple foxglove, tiny white asters, and goldenrod swayed in the breeze, their petals trembling as a bird—some forest thrush—flitted down to peck at the soft soil. The distant caw of a crow broke the peace for a moment before silence fell again, the land seeming to hold its breath in anticipation.

Yes, this would do.

The dwarf reached up, adjusting the strap of his pack before stepping forward. He had work to do, and the land would soon know his mark.

Gorrin settled himself on a flat rock near the river's edge, letting out a deep breath as he took in the crisp mountain air. It filled his lungs with a cool sharpness, tinged with pine and the distant scent of damp stone. The early morning sun cast long golden rays through the trees, their trunks stretching like sentinels into the sky. He ran a calloused hand through his thick, sweat-damp beard before finally rising, his decision set.

He unfastened the axe from his back, gripping the sturdy handle with a familiarity born of years of use. With practiced ease, he approached the nearest tree—a tall spruce with thick, healthy limbs—and swung. The first strike bit deep into the bark, sending a satisfying tremor up his arms. Again and again, the blade rose and fell, the rhythmic thunk of steel into wood breaking the silence of the forest. Sap oozed from the fresh wound, and after a few more strikes, the mighty tree groaned, leaning forward before crashing down with a heavy crackle of snapping branches and a thunderous impact that rattled the earth beneath his boots.

Gorrin wasted no time. He stripped the branches with swift, sure movements, clearing the trunk until it was smooth and bare. Then, he moved on to the next, and the next, felling them one by one. Hours passed. His muscles burned, sweat dripped from his brow, and still, he

continued. The morning gave way to midday, then late afternoon, and by the time the sun hung low on the horizon, twenty trees lay in neat rows, their trunks ready to be shaped.

The next task was tedious but necessary—cutting the felled logs into manageable sizes and carving deep wedges into their ends so they could be locked together. Gorrin worked with patience, wielding his axe and saw with steady precision. By evening, he had dragged the first few logs to a flat clearing near the river, marking the spot where his home would stand.

As darkness crept in, exhaustion settled into his bones, but hunger called louder. He stripped down and waded into the river, the cold water biting against his skin like a thousand needles. He let it wash over him, cleaning away the sweat and dust of the day's labor before he set to fishing. With a simple handline, he caught three plump trout, their silver scales glistening in the moonlight. A fire was built, the fish gutted and skewered, the scent of roasting meat filling the cool night air.

Gorrin ate in silence, staring into the flames as he gnawed on the crispy, blackened skin of his meal. When the fire had burned down to glowing embers, he laid his weary body onto the thick boar skin he carried, staring up at the stars for a long moment before sleep claimed him.

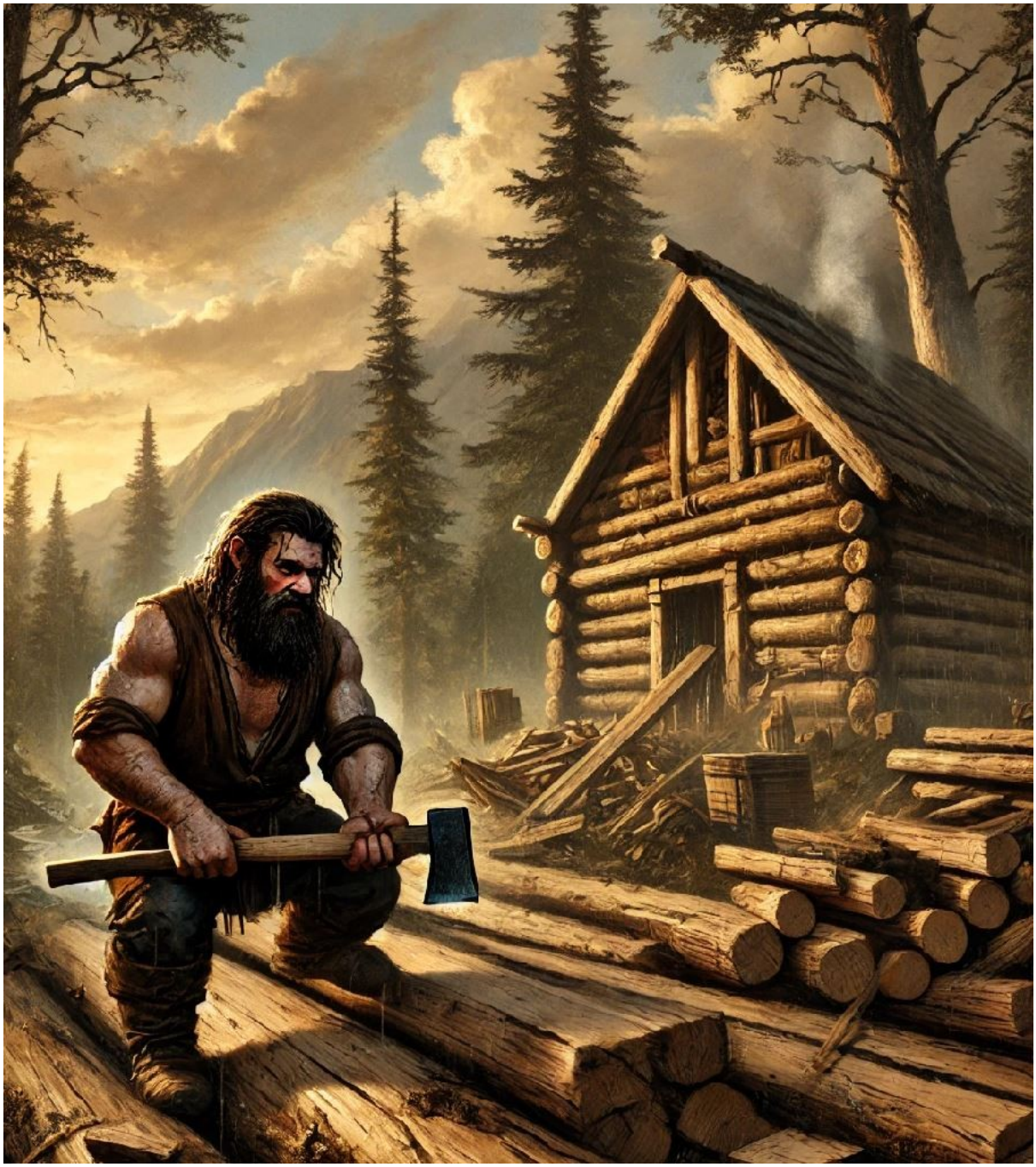
The days passed in a blur of labor. Each morning, he rose before the sun, muscles sore but willing. The log walls slowly took shape, each one carefully fitted atop the next, sealed with packed moss and mud to insulate against the harsh mountain winds. The sturdy foundation turned into a structure, and with every new log he placed, the skeleton of his home grew taller.

After nearly two weeks, the walls stood firm, a sturdy rectangle of raw timber. Now came the roof—a task requiring precision and patience. Gorrin fashioned rafters from the straightest trees, cutting and measuring each piece with care. His hands, rough and blistered, worked with relentless determination, shaping the beams with a saw and adze, smoothing their edges so they would fit snugly atop the growing frame.

As he worked, the landscape around him became more familiar, more his. The birds no longer startled at the sound of his axe. The river was his source of life, and the towering mountains seemed less like an imposing backdrop and more like watchful guardians. He was no longer just a traveler passing through—this land was his now, and his mark upon it had only begun.

With the rafters set firmly in place, Gorrin moved on to the next crucial step—covering the roof. He set his axe aside and took up his spade, driving it deep into the earth to carve out thick patches of sod. Each clump was heavy, rich with damp soil and thick grass roots that would bind together as they dried. He stacked them onto the roof, one layer after another, pressing them firmly into place. The sod would act as insulation, keeping the house warm in the cold months and cool in the heat of summer.

By the time he had covered the entire roof, he was left with a bare patch of earth beside his home. A small field—perfect for planting when the time came. He smoothed the soil with the back of his spade, mentally marking where he might one day grow hardy crops like barley or root vegetables.



The next week, he turned his attention inside. Using his saw, he cut rough planks from the remaining logs, each board thick and sturdy. He built small wooden beams and laid them across floor, fitting them snugly together, hammering them into place. The uneven ground soon became a solid wooden floor beneath his boots. Then came the inner walls, sectioning off a small sleeping space and a storage area. His days blurred into one another—building, eating, sleeping. He carved shelves into the walls, built a rough table from thick logs, fashioned a chair with simple but sturdy legs. A frame for a bed took shape, though for now, he still slept on his old boar skin. Lastly, he gathered stones from the riverbank and built a hearth and chimney, stacking and sealing the stones with a mixture of clay and wet earth. Smoke curled up into the sky for the first time, marking this place as lived in.

Three months had passed. His home was complete.

One afternoon, as Gorrin sat outside sharpening his axe, he heard movement from the treeline. He looked up, squinting against the sun. A group of travelers emerged—dwarves, like him. A bearded man, broad-shouldered and strong, carried a heavy pack. Beside him walked a stout woman, her long braids bound tightly over her shoulders. Two young ones trailed behind, their eyes wide as they took in the landscape.

The dwarf man stopped and planted his feet, looking over the land before his gaze settled on Gorrin.

"Hail there, stranger," the dwarf called, his voice deep and steady.

Gorrin rested his axe on his shoulder and nodded. "Hail yourself. What brings you here?"

The dwarf gestured at the open land, the river, the mountains beyond. "We're looking for a place to settle. Name’s Bolin. This here’s my wife, Sigrid, and our boys, Tor and Olin."

Gorrin grunted, eyeing the family. They carried all they owned on their backs—bedrolls, tools, small sacks of provisions. Travelers, much like he had been not so long ago.

"Good land here," Gorrin said after a moment. "Water’s fresh, trees are strong, soil’s rich enough for planting. Built my home here myself." He nodded toward his cabin. "Took hard work, but it stands solid."

Sigrid stepped forward, looking over the land with a calculating gaze. "The mountains will break the worst of the winds. The river's close, plenty of fish. We could do worse."

Bolin scratched his beard. "Aye. What do you think, boys?"

Tor, the older of the two, grinned. "It’s open. Feels safe."

Olin, younger, kicked a rock with his boot. "Better than sleeping on the road again."

Sigrid turned back to Bolin. "It’s good land," she said simply.

Bolin nodded, decision made. "Then we’ll settle here."

Gorrin jerked his chin toward the trees. "You’ll be needing a home. I’ll lend you my saw and hammer. You’ll need strong walls before the mountain winds turn."

Bolin clapped a hand on his shoulder. "Much obliged, friend. We won’t be a burden."

And so they set to work.

Bolin and his family picked a spot near the river, not far from Gorrin’s home but with enough space to make it their own. The first week was spent felling trees, just as Gorrin had done. He showed Bolin how to strip the logs, how to carve the notches for fitting them together. They worked tirelessly, each day measured by the rising and setting of the sun.

Sigrid and the boys gathered stones for the hearth, stacking them in neat piles while Bolin and Gorrin worked the logs into place. The walls rose steadily, and before long, the shape of a home stood against the open land.

When their own roof was ready, Gorrin showed them how to cut and lay the sod, packing it tight so it wouldn't shift in the rain. They built their floor next, shaping planks from raw timber, hammering each one into place. In the evenings, they gathered by Gorrin's fire, sharing food and stories before exhaustion sent them to their bedrolls.

It was hard work, but satisfying. The days passed, and soon another home stood firm against the wilds. A small settlement, no longer just one man and his axe, but a growing place, shaped by hands that knew the value of labor and the worth of stone, wood, and fire.

With his home complete and sturdy, Gorrin turned his attention to the land itself. A strong home was only the beginning—if he was to thrive here, he needed to make sure the earth worked for him.

One morning, he set out across the plain, eyes scanning the ground for signs of wild root vegetables. The soil here was rich, dark, and moist beneath the grass, perfect for growing. He knelt, running thick fingers through the dirt before spotting the telltale broad leaves of a tuber plant. With his short spade, he dug carefully, unearthing a thick, knotted root. He sniffed it—earthy, starchy, good for eating.

As the hours passed, he found four different kinds of roots: one long and pale, another small and purple, a third that bled orange when cut, and a thick, knobby one with a sharp scent. Alongside them, he gathered other useful plants: bitter greens with curling leaves, yellow-flowered stalks that had a spicy tang, and a creeping vine with thick, water-filled stems. These would serve him well.

Returning to his home, he worked his small field, breaking apart clumps of earth and setting his finds into neat rows. He drove stakes into the ground, stretching twine between them to mark the planting beds. With the leftover branches from his construction work, he built a small fence, weaving them together in a tight barrier to keep out wandering animals.

His next task was more ambitious—trees. The plains had few, but the forest was rich with wild fruit trees. He spent another day scouting, carefully digging up young saplings. He returned with five sturdy trees: one that bore small red fruits, another with golden pears, a squat tree with broad leaves that smelled of citrus, and two thick-trunked trees with dark, bitter berries. He planted them near his home, setting stones around their bases to hold moisture in the soil.

As time passed, Gorrin was no longer alone.

More dwarves came, wandering travelers who saw what he had built and recognized the promise of the land. One by one, families arrived, setting up their own homes, clearing ground, cutting timber. They worked together, helping one another with the heavy labor. Before long, there were ten families scattered across the landscape, each with their own homestead, their own firepits, their own futures taking root in the soil.

Gorrin stood atop a small rise one evening, watching as smoke from ten hearths curled into the darkening sky. He folded his arms, satisfaction deep in his chest. He had set the first stone, and now a village was taking shape.

He made a habit of fishing almost daily, rising before dawn and casting his line into the clear, cold river. The fish here were plentiful—trout, fat and silver-scaled, and a long, eel-like fish that had sweet white flesh. When he brought back more than he could eat, he shared it with his neighbors.

One afternoon, as Gorrin helped Bolin raise a roof beam on his home, another dwarf, old and grizzled, leaned against a half-built wall, puffing on a pipe.

“This place is coming together,” the old dwarf, named Orek, said. “Didn’t think I’d see a village rise outta nowhere, but here we are.”

Bolin wiped sweat from his brow. “Aye, and it’s good work. My boys have a place to grow up. No orcs, no goblins.”

From across the clearing, Sigrid called out, arms crossed. “And no ale neither, Bolin! When are you lot gonna start a brewery?”

Laughter rippled through the group. Another dwarf, Harvin, a wiry fellow with sharp eyes, grinned. “Give us time, woman! First, we need barley. Can’t brew beer outta tree bark.”

Gorrin smiled, adjusting the log beam into place. “The way Bolin drinks, we’d best build the brewery before the next house.”

Bolin snorted. “Bah! Let’s finish the house first. Then we’ll talk about ale.”

The work continued, and soon, each home had walls and a roof. The dwarves helped one another, lifting heavy logs, carving planks, sharing tools. They built hearths from stone, dug small wells, and set up sturdy wooden doors. Every day, the village grew stronger, more settled.

One evening, as they sat around a central fire, an older dwarf woman named Brona spoke up. “We oughta name this place. Every good home needs a name.”

Harvin nodded. “Aye. Something strong. Something lasting.”

Orek blew smoke into the air, considering. “How about Stonebrook? We’ve got stone, we’ve got the river.”

Sigrid tapped her chin. “What about Torhaven? A place of strength, a safe hold.”

The dwarves murmured among themselves, debating, arguing, laughing. But Gorrin simply listened, watching as the village he had started took on a life of its own. The name didn’t matter—not as much as the fact that they were here, that they had built something worth naming.

Tomorrow, there would be more work. More homes, more fields, more stories told by firelight.

For now, Gorrin simply leaned back and looked up at the stars, feeling the weight of the world settle into place, right where it belonged.

The village had a name now—Stonebrook—and it was growing faster than Gorrin had imagined. Every day, new faces arrived, weary travelers who had heard of a place where dwarves were carving out a home of their own.

With more hands came more work. The land, once wild and untamed, was slowly bending to the will of its settlers. Some of the dwarves had arrived with sturdy mountain-bred horses, strong creatures that could pull more than their weight. With their own craftsmanship, the dwarves built plows from thick timber and iron scraps, fastening them together with rawhide and wooden pegs.

Out on the plains, dwarves dug up the soil, pulling out thick clumps of grass and roots, clearing space for fields. Others set out in search of wild grains, and they found barley growing in thick, golden patches further out. It wasn't long before they brought back armfuls of it, stripping the seeds and planting them in neat rows. Agriculture had begun.

Stonebrook was no longer just a cluster of homes—it was a thriving settlement.

Gorrin, however, had his mind set on something else. A village needed more than food and shelter—it needed industry. Tools, weapons, ironworks.

The mountains called to him, promising riches buried beneath stone. One morning, with his pack filled with chisels, a sturdy hammer, and a pickaxe, Gorrin set out. The towering peaks loomed above him, their sheer cliffs untouched by time. He climbed higher, scanning the rocky slopes for signs of ore.

He didn't have to look far. The mountains were rich with minerals. Rust-red streaks ran along the cliffsides, glinting in the sunlight. He cracked a few chunks free, turning them over in his hands. Iron ore. Plenty of it. They also found some charcoal.

Over the next week, he and a few others—Bolin, Harvin, and a burly smith named Dorik—hauled heavy sacks of ore back to Stonebrook. There, they cleared a space near the river and began construction of a smelter.

The first step was building the furnace. They dug a deep pit and lined it with stone, mixing a thick clay paste to hold everything together. The furnace needed to be tall and hot—hot enough to melt iron. Wood was chopped daily, the logs stacked high to keep the fires burning with added charcoal.

When all was ready, Gorrin stood before the smelter, a pile of raw iron ore at his feet. He tossed the first chunk inside. Flames roared to life, consuming the wood beneath it, and soon the furnace glowed white-hot.

Dorik wiped his brow, watching the fire. "If the flames hold, we'll have raw iron by morning."

Harvin chuckled. “And after that? You’ll be hammerin’ metal ‘til your beard falls out.”

Gorrin smiled. “Aye, and the first thing I’ll make is an anvil. No good ironwork without a proper base.”

That night, the furnace burned bright as the sun, the flames licking up into the dark sky. The villagers gathered, watching as the first molten metal ran like liquid fire into the stone molds they had prepared. As it cooled, the first bars of iron were born.

It was a start.

The forge became the heartbeat of the village. Every day, Gorrin and Dorik worked beside the roaring fires, hammering out nails, hinges, and blades. The constant clang of metal against metal echoed across Stonebrook.

Bolin stopped by one afternoon, watching Gorrin at the anvil. “Think you’ll be makin’ armor next?” he asked, arms crossed.

Gorrin grunted, shaping a thick iron wedge with his hammer. “Armor? Maybe later. First, we need proper tools. Better plows, stronger axes. The village comes first.”

From the doorway, Sigrid called out, smiling. “Aye, but after the tools, I expect to see a brew kettle made from iron.”

Harvin laughed, setting down a bundle of wood. “You’ll have ale in no time, woman! We’ve got barley growing already.”

Nearby, more homes were rising fast. The community worked as one, helping each other raise walls, carve beams, and haul timber. With more iron coming in, some dwarves reinforced their doors and built hinges and latches instead of wooden pegs.

With thirty families now calling Stonebrook home, the settlement had become more than just a place to live. It was a community. Dwarves gathered in the evenings, sharing food and tales by the fire. Children ran through the fields, playing near the river.

One evening, Gorrin sat on a bench outside his home, watching the village hum with life. He took a deep breath of the warm night air, the scent of fresh earth, burning coal, and roasting meat filling his senses.

Stonebrook had started with his axe and his hands. Now, it was a village of builders, farmers, and smiths. And soon, it would become much more.

The village of Stonebrook was thriving. Each day, it grew stronger, more established, as the dwarves found their own places in the workings of the settlement.

The smelter burned hot, fed by charcoal hauled down from the mountains. It was an endless task—every few days, a group of villagers took their carts up the slopes, gathering blackened wood and smoldering embers from the pits where they carefully burned logs into fuel. The charcoal kept their homes warm at night and, more importantly, kept the forge roaring.

At the anvil, Gorrin hammered away daily, shaping metal into the tools the village needed. Nails, hinges, iron strappings for doors, saw blades, plow edges—anything that made their work easier.

One morning, Harvin, his wiry friend with the keen eyes, approached the forge. He stood, arms folded, watching Gorrin shape a thick axe head, sparks flying with each strike.

"You ever get tired of swingin' that hammer, Gorrin?" Harvin asked.

Gorrin grunted, setting the red-hot metal aside. "Aye, but it's gotta be done."

Harvin picked up one of the finished tools, weighing it in his hand. "I'll take over."

Gorrin arched a brow. "You're serious?"

Harvin grinned. "You've done enough. Time you do more huntin' and livin'. I'll be the smith now."

Gorrin studied him for a moment, then smiled. "Then you'd best earn your place at the anvil."

They shook hands, and from that day on, Harvin was the village smith. Gorrin, freed from the forge, turned his attention elsewhere.

Gorrin had always been a builder, but he was also a hunter. The wilds had plenty to offer, and he meant to take advantage of it.

First, he crafted a bow—a sturdy weapon made from flexible yew wood, its string woven from strong sinew. He fletched arrows with feathers from mountain birds, sharpening their tips to fine points.

Then, he set out toward the foothills, where he had seen mountain goats grazing on high ledges. The trek was tough, the air thinner, the ground rocky. But Gorrin moved carefully, stalking his prey.

When he found a herd, he crouched low, drawing back his bow. The string tensed, his breath slowed, and then—release.

The arrow struck true, piercing the thick hide of a goat. It tumbled down the rocks, its last breath a sharp exhale into the wind.

But hunting one wasn't enough—he needed them alive.

Gorrin built traps, sturdy pens of thick logs and sharpened stakes, baited with salt and fresh greens. Over the next few days, he caught three goats alive—strong animals with thick coats and sharp eyes. When he brought them back to the village, the dwarves cheered.

"Milk, at last!" Sigrid exclaimed, hands on her hips.

The villagers built pens, feeding the goats well, and soon, the first milk was collected.

With the fruit trees heavy with harvest and the barley fields golden with grain, there was only one thing left to do—brew.

The dwarves built a stone-lined brewing pit and set massive barrels over the fire, boiling the barley mash. The yeast was collected from the air, fermenting the mix in sealed barrels stored in the cool shade of their homes.

Sigrid, who had been pestering the men for ale, was finally satisfied when the first mugs of frothy brew were poured.

"Damn fine work," she said, raising a mug. "Not bad for a village that didn't even exist a year ago."

The dwarves laughed, clanking their mugs together.

Meanwhile, Gorrin had his own dark ale fermenting. It sat in thick oak barrels, deep and rich, bubbling in its slow transformation. He made sure it was strong—a drink worthy of the hard work that built Stonebrook.

But ale needed to keep cold, as did the fresh goat's milk, meats, and fruit.

Gorrin set to work building a cellar under his house.

The ground was tough, but he lined the walls with thick wooden beams to prevent collapse. Once deep enough, he planked the floor with smooth-hewn boards. The entrance was sealed with a stout wooden trap door, keeping the inside cool and dark.

Inside, barrels of ale were stored, alongside sacks of grain, dried meat, and fresh cheese made from goat's milk. It was a proper storage house, a place where supplies would last for months.

With food, ale, iron, and a steady community of workers, Stonebrook was no longer just a village—it was a stronghold of its own.

One night, as the fires crackled and mugs clanked, Gorrin leaned back, taking in the sight of the growing village. Homes lined the hillsides, farms stretched across the plains, and the forge's glow never died.

Stonebrook was his.

And soon, it would be more than just a village—it would be a legacy.

A full year had passed since Gorrin first laid the foundation of Stonebrook, and what had once been a lone cabin by the river had become a flourishing settlement.

Now, seventy dwarves called the village home. Every few weeks, new travelers arrived—some with nothing but the packs on their backs, others leading sturdy ponies laden with supplies. Some brought livestock—piglets, a cow, a few hens—and before long, Stonebrook had its first farm animals.

With the land tilled and barley fields growing strong, there was now plenty of food for people. Animals had grass to graze on.

The piglets grew fat, the cow gave fresh milk, and the hens laid eggs daily. Some of the villagers carefully hatched more hens, ensuring there would always be fresh eggs and meat when needed.

A wooden barn was built near the pens, providing shelter for the animals. Straw was gathered from the fields, stacked high to keep them comfortable.

"It's a fine thing," Harvin said one afternoon, watching a piglet root around in the dirt. "We've got ale, food, metalwork—this place is startin' to feel like a proper home."

Sigrid smiled. "And what makes a home for you, Harvin? A full belly and a full mug?"

"Aye!" Harvin laughed, slapping his knee. "And a roof that don't leak!"

With the population growing, the villagers needed more flour for bread. Grinding grain by hand was slow work, and so one of the newcomers, a dwarf named Orik, proposed something greater—a windmill with a waterwheel by the river.

It took weeks of work, with Gorrin, Bolin, and Orik leading the effort. Massive beams were cut, shaped, and lifted into place. A stone base was laid to hold the structure firm. The waterwheel was built with thick wooden paddles, turning smoothly with the river's steady flow.

When it was done, the first sack of grain was poured in, and the wheel turned the great grinding stones. Flour poured out, fine and white, ready for baking.

Sigrid, watching the mill at work, crossed her arms. "Now we just need a proper baker."

"You volunteering?" Orik chuckled.

Sigrid snorted. "Not a chance! But someone else will. Dwarves won't last on meat and ale alone."

With all this prosperity, it was only natural that the next great structure in Stonebrook should be a tavern.

The dwarves gathered, talking it over. What was a village without a place to drink and gather?

Gorrin himself oversaw the building of the tavern. It was made bigger than the other houses, with thick support beams and a wide common hall. Tables were carved from solid oak, and stone hearths were set at either end of the room, ensuring warmth even when the nights grew cool.

Behind the bar, great barrels of ale were stacked, some filled with Sigrid's first successful homebrew, others with Gorrin's dark ale, thick as iron and strong enough to make a grown dwarf sing.

The first night the tavern opened, the villagers filled the hall, mugs clinking, laughter rolling through the room.

Bolin raised his mug. "To Stonebrook!"

"To Stonebrook!" the villagers cheered, ale sloshing as they drank deep.

Sigrid, standing behind the bar, smiled. "And to the fools who thought we couldn't make this place work!"

More laughter followed, and the sound of dwarves singing old mining songs echoed into the warm night.

Stonebrook was more than just a settlement now.

It was a home.

One evening, Gorrin and Harvin sat outside the forge, sharing a drink and watching the smelter glow hot against the night. The village had grown strong, but Gorrin had learned long ago that strength alone was never enough.

"Harvin," Gorrin grunted, taking a long pull from his ale. "I've been thinking. We ought to have some weapons on hand. Just in case."

Harvin raised an eyebrow. "Weapons? You expecting trouble?"

"Not expecting. Just preparing." Gorrin set his mug down. "Stonebrook is peaceful now, but peace never lasts forever. A blade at the ready is worth ten forged too late."

Harvin scratched his beard, considering. "Aye… I'm no master blacksmith, but I can hammer out a simple blade or two. Nothing fancy, but strong enough to cut if needed."

The next morning, Harvin got to work.

The first step was preparing the iron forms, simple molds laid out to pour the molten metal into shape. More charcoal was hauled down from the mountains, keeping the furnace blazing hot.

The iron ore was fed into the flames, melting down into liquid metal. Harvin carefully poured it into the molds, letting it cool before reheating it for the hammering process.

With his hammer in hand, he struck the metal, shaping the first sword. Each strike sent sparks flying, the blade slowly taking form beneath his steady rhythm.

Gorrin helped, turning the blade over the grinding stone, sharpening its edge. It was a simple thing—a straight, single-edged sword, heavy and durable. But it would serve its purpose.

Harvin wiped his brow, examining his work. "Not the finest blade I've ever seen, but it'll cut, at least."

Gorrin nodded approvingly. "We're not making showpieces. We're making weapons for survival. Keep at it. Soon enough, your hands will learn the craft."

The days passed in steady work—building, farming, forging. Stonebrook was now a lively place, bustling with activity and trade.

One day, after much arguing, Sigrid finally started working in the mill.

She had been lazy at first, content to drink and boss others around. But after a heated argument with her husband Bolin, he gave her a few well-placed smacks to straighten her out. Grumbling but determined, she rolled up her sleeves and took over the bakery.

Within days, the scent of fresh bread filled the village.

"Hells, it's about time!" Harvin laughed, biting into a fresh loaf. "Took a beating to get her to work, but worth it!"

Sigrid, rolling dough behind the counter, shot him a glare. "Keep talking, Harvin, and you'll get stale crumbs instead of fresh bread."

The laughter continued, but no one could deny it—Stonebrook was thriving.

Gorrin spent more time in the mountains, hunting wild game and gathering iron ore and charcoal. The goats had grown in number, and now he could track and hunt bigger prey.

One day, while wandering near the river fields, he found something unexpected—hemp plants.

He studied the tall, fibrous stalks, recognizing them immediately. This could be useful. He carefully uprooted some and planted them in his garden.

With proper care, the hemp would provide strong rope, durable fabric, and—most importantly—fine pipe material.

That night, as he sat by his hearth, he lit his pipe with the new hemp and took a deep, satisfied pull.

"Now this is proper relaxation," he muttered, watching the embers glow.

With each passing month, Gorrin's home grew more comfortable.

He carved new furniture—solid chairs, a sturdy writing desk, and thick wooden shelves to store his tools and supplies. His bed was no longer just a simple frame—he had built a proper mattress, stuffed with soft straw and covered with thick woven blankets.

A heavy bearskin rug lay in front of his hearth, and the stone walls of the cellar below kept his ale and smoked meats fresh.

His cabin was no longer just a shelter.

It was a home.

Stonebrook was growing, and so was its future.

Dumgral’dur

Not far away in the mountainsthe city of Dumgral’dur stood mighty and unshaken, a true dwarven stronghold carved into the very bones of the mountain. Its great stone walls rose high, reinforced with iron and adorned with massive runic carvings that glowed faintly in the dim light. Thick iron gates, as tall as ten dwarves stacked atop one another, stood permanently guarded by armored warriors, their axes gleaming and their expressions stern.

Within its walls, the city pulsed with life and industry. Thousand upon thousands of dwarves bustled through the streets, their voices a deep rumble of trade, argument, and camaraderie. The air smelled of coal smoke, strong ale, roasting meat, and the ever-present scent of stone and metal.

The city was divided into districts, each with a purpose and a soul of its own with the Forge District, where great smelters burned day and night, and the sound of hammer on steel never ceased. The Market Square, a sprawling network of stalls and stone-built shops, where one could buy anything from fresh game to mastercrafted weapons. The Warrior’s Guild, where seasoned fighters trained and sparred, preparing for any conflict that might arise. The Royal District, deep within the mountain, where King Durnhelm Ironbeard ruled from his throne of blackened steel and gold. The Mines, where the veins of the mountain were dug deep, providing the lifeblood of Dumgral’dur—iron, gold, and gemstones.

It was early morning when Gorrin set out from Stonebrook, the sun just beginning to cast golden light over the fields. He rode the village’s lone horse, a sturdy mountain breed, well-trained for hard travel.

His pack was filled with little coin, a collection from the villagers, enough to buy some tools and a strong bull for cattle breeding. He carried his sword at his side—just in case.

The road to Dumgral’dur was winding, carved through rock and dense woodland, well-traveled but dangerous at times.

A few hours into his journey, Gorrin spotted a figure on the road ahead—a human traveler, cloaked and hooded, sitting on a rock by the roadside. As Gorrin approached, the man raised a hand in greeting.

"Ho, dwarf!" the man called. "Might I trouble you for some directions?"

Gorrin pulled his horse to a stop. He was always cautious around strangers on the road, but he nodded. "Where to?"

The man rose slowly, stepping closer. "Dumgral’dur. I seem to have lost my way."

Gorrin grunted. "Keep followin’ this road west. You’ll see the mountain soon enough."

The man smiled, but there was something off about it—something too eager, too tense. Then, in an instant, his expression darkened.

"Now," the man muttered, stepping forward and drawing a long, curved knife from beneath his cloak. "Hand over your coin, dwarf. All of it."

Gorrin’s eyes narrowed. His grip tightened on the reins.

"You really think that’s gonna happen?" Gorrin said, his voice low and dangerous.

The man sneered. "I’ve slit plenty of dwarven throats before, I’ll slit another if need be." He stepped closer, blade gleaming.

Gorrin slid off his horse, boots crunching the dirt. He stood firm, rolling his shoulders, his sword still sheathed.

"Go on then," Gorrin said. "Try me."

The man lunged.

The knife flashed forward, aiming for Gorrin’s ribs—but Gorrin wasn’t slow. He sidestepped, grabbing the man’s wrist in a crushing grip.

With dwarven strength, he twisted, forcing the man’s arm downward. The blade missed its mark, grazing Gorrin’s tunic instead.

"Bad move," Gorrin growled.

Before the man could react, Gorrin brought his forehead crashing into the human’s face. Bone cracked. The man staggered back, blood pouring from his shattered nose.

Fury replaced pain, and the man lunged again, swinging his knife wildly.

Steel flashed.

Gorrin’s sword was out in an instant. The sharp dwarven blade met flesh with a sickening slice.

The man froze. He looked down at his stomach—where Gorrin’s blade was buried deep.

A gurgled gasp escaped his lips. He stumbled back, dropping his knife, hands grasping the wound as dark blood poured down his tunic.

Gorrin ripped the blade free, a violent spray hitting the dirt.

The man collapsed, twitching, choking.

A few moments later, he was still.

Gorrin wiped his blade on the dead man’s cloak. He looked down at the lifeless body and spat. "Told you it wasn’t gonna happen."

He checked the corpse for anything useful—a few coins, a dull knife, nothing much. Then, with a final grunt, he mounted his horse and rode on toward Dumgral’dur, leaving the cooling corpse behind in the dust.

Gorrin rode through the massive gates of Dumgral’dur, the towering iron portcullis rising above him as he steered his cart into the bustling market district.

The streets were alive with trade, dwarves shouting prices over the noise of clinking coins, haggling voices, and the distant clang of forges from the smithing district. Merchants sold everything from armor and weapons to fine silks, smoked meats, and barrels of aged ale.

Gorrin pulled his horse to a stop near the toolsmith’s stall.

The toolsmith, a broad-shouldered dwarf with soot-streaked hands, looked up from his work.

"What can I get ya, lad?"

"I need some axe heads, a saw, chisels, and a good planer. We’re buildin’ up a village, so they need to last."

The smith nodded, gesturing to a sturdy wooden display. Iron axe heads, freshly forged, gleamed in the morning light. The saw had a thick wooden handle and sharp, jagged teeth, and the chisels were made of tempered steel.

Gorrin picked up the tools, inspecting them. "How much?"

The smith scratched his beard. "For the lot? Five silvers."

"Four," Gorrin countered, crossing his arms.

The smith snorted. "Four and a half."

Gorrin grumbled but dropped the coins into the dwarf’s calloused hand. The smith chuckled, shaking his head as he wrapped up the tools.

"Good doing trade with ya, lad."

Next, Gorrin headed to the cattle pens, where the stench of livestock was thick in the air. Dwarves led cows, pigs, and goats around, their low bellows mixing with the sound of merchants shouting prices.

A thick-bellied dwarf with a leather apron and a loud voice waved him over. "You lookin’ for somethin’ strong, lad? Got a fine mountain bull here—good for breeding, strong as a cart horse."

Gorrin eyed the beast. It was large, muscular, its coat a dark brown, its horns curved sharply.

"Aye, it’s big," Gorrin admitted. "But…" He squinted at the bull, stepping closer. "Its eyes look a bit cross-eyed."

The seller frowned. "What? No, no! That’s just the way the light hits ‘em!"

Gorrin grunted skeptically. "Cross-eyed bull might walk circles instead of straight. Not worth the full price."

The seller scowled but saw he wasn’t winning this one. "Fine! Eight silvers."

"Six," Gorrin shot back.

The dwarf groaned. "Seven, and not a copper less."

Gorrin spat on his hand and shook. "Done."

With his new bull strapped to the cart, Gorrin made his way toward a much-needed drink.

The Thin Bear was a well-known watering hole, tucked between a stone bakery and a weaponsmith’s shop. Its heavy wooden doors were carved with images of bears fighting with tankards in hand, a ridiculous but fitting sign.

Gorrin hitched the cart outside, stepped in, and was immediately greeted with the rich scent of ale, roast meat, and pipe smoke.

The tavern was lively, dwarves laughing, drinking, playing dice at the tables. A bard strummed a lute in the corner, singing about a warrior who accidentally married a goblin queen after too much ale.

Gorrin stomped to the bar, slapping a silver down. "Ale."

The tavern keeper, a bald, thick-armed dwarf with a scar over his eye, grabbed a heavy wooden mug, filled it to the brim with frothy beer, and slid it over.

"What’s new in Dumgral’dur?" Gorrin asked, gulping half the mug in one go.

The innkeeper leaned on the counter. "Plenty of work, if you’re lookin’. Warrior’s Guild’s always hiring sword arms. The market needs hands for loading carts. The mines pay good silver, if ya don’t mind losin’ a few teeth from fallin’ rock. Masons’ Guild needs builders—always someone breakin’ a damn wall ‘round here."

Gorrin nodded, taking another long drink. "Any real news? Something worth listenin’ to?"

The innkeeper grinned, eyes twinkling. "Oh, you’ll love this one."

"So there’s this new merchant in town, sells fancy perfumes and oils—real highborn stuff. The kind nobles sniff at their wrists and pretend they’re better than the rest of us."

Gorrin snorted. "Dwarves and perfumes don’t mix."

"Exactly!" the innkeeper laughed. "But this fool sets up stall right in front of the forge district. Whole street stinks of lavender and elf-flower."

Gorrin chuckled. "Bet that went well."

The innkeeper grinned wider. "Well, a blacksmith's apprentice, a young fool named Bori, got a bright idea. He tells the merchant he'll buy a whole bottle—but only if the merchant takes a good whiff of the forge. Says a real dwarf needs to know what fire and iron smell like."

Gorrin raised an eyebrow. "And?"

The innkeeper smiled. "Bori and the lads shove him right into a pile of fresh coal dust. Turned him black as a cave goblin. Then they doused him in his own perfume, so he stank like roses and soot."

Gorrin bellowed a laugh, pounding his fist on the bar. "Hells! Wish I'd seen that!"

"Best part?" the innkeeper chuckled. "The fool's still selling his perfumes. Smells like burnt flowers, but the noble ladies love it."

Gorrin shook his head, finishing his ale. Dumgral'dur never changed.

Tomorrow, he'd head back to Stonebrook with a wagon full of tools, a strong bull, and a few new stories to tell.

Gorrin spent the night at The Thin Bear Tavern, a warm bed and a full belly of ale making for a heavy sleep. The next morning, he woke early, packed his things, and hitched the bull to the cart for the journey back to Stonebrook.

The return trip was slow.

The bull, stubborn as a boulder, refused to walk at a proper pace. It pulled against the rope, snorted, and occasionally stopped dead in the road to chew on some damn weed.

"Move yer fat arse, you hoofed bastard!" Gorrin growled, tugging at the lead rope.

The bull blinked at him, unimpressed.

Gorrin swore all the way home.

By midday, after much cursing, sweat, and threats of turning the beast into steaks, they finally rolled into Stonebrook.

The moment Gorrin arrived, villagers gathered around the cart.

"That the new bull?" Harvin smiled, leaning against a post. "Looks… slow."

"He's strong," Gorrin muttered, wiping his brow. "And he ain't much of a thinker, so he fits right in with the lot of you."

Laughter rippled through the gathered dwarves.

Bolin took the iron-headed axe Gorrin had bought and gave it a testing swing. "Hells, this is fine work. The smiths in Dumgral'dur still know their craft."

Sigrid took the new saw and ran her fingers along its teeth. "Bout time we had something sharper than Harvin's wit around here."

Harvin grinned. "Didn't hear you complainin' when I built your kitchen shelves, woman."

The tools were put to work immediately—plows reinforced, more timber cut, houses expanded. Stonebrook grew stronger.

A few days later, a stranger arrived in Stonebrook.

He was a lean, clean-shaven dwarf, dressed in fine but practical clothing. A royal crest was embroidered on his tunic. He rode in on a sturdy mountain pony, carrying a leather-bound ledger under one arm.

"Ho there!" he called as he entered the village square. "Who's in charge here?"

Gorrin, arms crossed, stepped forward. "No one's in charge. We built this place together."

The overseer smiled, dismounting. "Then consider this official. As of today, Stonebrook is registered under the Dumgral'dur estate. I am Haildrik Ironcaller, royal overseer of these lands. I am here to do three things—register able-bodied men for the city estate, ensure military training is given, and collect taxes."

Gorrin's stomach sank.

"Taxes?" he grumbled. "We just finished building the bloody place, and already the king's takin' a slice?"

Haildrik sighed, as if he had heard this complaint a hundred times before. "The tax is small—a few silvers per family per season. It goes toward road maintenance, security, and ensuring Dumgral'dur stays strong."

"Aye, and lined pockets," Gorrin muttered under his breath.

Haildrik either ignored him or pretended not to hear. "Second," he continued, "all able-bodied men over the age of twenty must be registered. This is in case the city requires soldiers or laborers in times of crisis."

Bolin crossed his arms. "So what? If war comes, we get dragged off to die for a king we ain't never met?"

Haildrik gave a polite but firm nod. "It is the law."

Silence settled over the village.

Gorrin exhaled, rubbing his temples. Damn. Just settle down, and already the king's men show up.

"Third," Haildrik said, changing the subject quickly, "a military instructor will visit Stonebrook four times a week to train the men in basic combat and discipline."

Harvin smiled. "Ah, so we get free fight lessons? Maybe I'll stick an axe in your ledger if you stand still long enough."

Haildrik chuckled. "That would be unwise."

Within days, the military training began.

A veteran soldier named Captain Torgun Stonefist arrived—a grizzled dwarf with a missing ear, a long white beard, and arms thick as tree trunks. He had served in three wars and had no patience for softness.

"Listen up!" Torgun barked, pacing before the gathered villagers. "You lot may be farmers and builders, but if the world turns to fire, you'll hold a blade, or you'll lose your land."

The training was brutal—hard drills, sparring matches, discipline exercises.

Bolin got knocked flat on his arse the first day.

Harvin learned the hard way that fighting drunk was a bad idea.

Gorrin, however, took to it quickly. His broad frame and natural strength made him a quick learner with a blade. His fighting instincts sharpened, and soon Captain Torgun took notice.

"You there, Gorrin," the captain said after a sparring match. "You fight like you've had an axe in your hand since you could walk."

Gorrin wiped the sweat from his brow. "I swing hammers, not blades."

"A hammer's just an axe with less ambition," Torgun grinned. "You're a natural. The village needs leadership. You oughta be the village elder."

Gorrin stiffened. "I never wanted to be in charge."

"You already are," the captain replied. "The others look to you. That's all leadership is."

Gorrin didn't answer. He just grunted and turned away.

But deep down, he knew—Stonebrook was growing, and whether he liked it or not, he was becoming its backbone.

Stonebrook grew.

With each passing day, the village bustled with life and industry. Cattle bred, and soon there were more calves and piglets than pens could hold. More hands meant more homes, and twenty new settlers arrived, bringing skills, tools, and hard work.

The village was no longer just a collection of homes—it was a proper settlement.

Jobs became more defined—the smiths hammered metal from dawn to dusk, the farmers tilled and harvested, the hunters tracked game in the forests, and Sigrid, true to her stubborn ways, had become the village's best baker.

Gorrin spent his days working, training, and helping Stonebrook thrive.

A year passed, and Gorrin honed his skill with a blade.

Under Captain Torgun's guidance, he learned not just how to swing a weapon but how to move, anticipate, and strike with precision. His broad build and natural strength made him deadly in combat, and soon he became the best fighter in the village.

"The axe is an extension of yer arm," Torgun had told him once. "Use it like ye'd use a hammer—with force, but not without thought."

And so he did.

Now, even Harvin, once cocky in the training ring, would think twice before sparring against Gorrin.

But hard work needed balance, and every night, the dwarves gathered in the tavern.

They drank strong ale, sang songs of the old clans, and told tales of the mountain lords, the great battles, and the foolishness of men.

Sigrid had taken up brewing properly, and now the village had its own signature ale, a dark, thick drink that hit like a hammer.

Bolin raised a mug one evening, slamming it on the table. "To Stonebrook! We built this place with our own hands, our sweat, our blood!"

"To Stonebrook!" the dwarves echoed, their voices roaring like a forge. Life was good.

With excess crops, furs, and tools, Stonebrook established regular trade with Dumgral'dur.

Caravans carried vegetables and grain from the fields. Ale barrels from the brewery. Simple iron tools from Harvin's forge. Animal furs from the hunters.

The coin from trade was pooled together, ensuring the village could buy what it needed—better tools, stronger livestock, maybe even weapons if need be.

One morning, Gorrin took up his bow and set off into the dense forest.

The trees stood thick and old, their canopies casting shadows across the forest floor. The air smelled of earth, pine, and damp wood, and the only sounds were the distant calls of birds and the soft rustling of leaves.

He moved quietly, his boots barely disturbing the ground.

Tracking took patience.

At last, he found fresh hoofprints in the soft mud near a stream. The tracks were deep—heavy. A stag. Gorrin followed.

He moved slowly, carefully, keeping the wind to his face so his scent wouldn't carry. He passed moss-covered rocks, ducked under low branches, and at last, he spotted it.

A large buck stood in a clearing, its antlers high, its brown coat rippling with muscle. Gorrin drew his bow. He took a slow breath, steadied his aim. The deer lifted its head, ears twitching. Gorrin exhaled. He loosed the arrow.

It whistled through the air, striking true—just behind the buck's shoulder. The animal jolted, stumbled, and then ran, crashing through the underbrush. Gorrin gave chase.

He followed the trail of broken twigs and blood, keeping his pace steady. After a short run, he found the deer collapsed near a tree, its breathing shallow.

With a final thrust of his hunting knife, Gorrin ended the hunt.

He wiped his blade, muttered a quiet thanks to the wild, and hoisted the carcass over his shoulders for the long walk back to Stonebrook.

Another day of work, another day providing. Stonebrook endured, grew, and thrived.

The village Stone Brew Tavern was lively that evening, its hearth roaring, the mugs full, and the air thick with smoke and laughter. The smell of roast meat and spiced ale filled the room as dwarves sat around heavy wooden tables, swapping tales, singing, and drowning the day's work in drink.

At the center of it all, Gorrin sat with Bolin, Harvin, and Sigrid, their mugs clinking as they drank deep.

"Been over a few years now, hasn't it?" Bolin mused, stroking his thick beard. "Since we all got here. Hard to believe this place was nothin' but trees and dirt back then."

"Aye," Harvin nodded. "And look at it now—we got homes, a forge, farms, trade, a proper tavern… and yet, here we sit, same as always, gettin' piss drunk."

"Some things never change," Sigrid smiled, swirling her ale.

Gorrin leaned back in his chair, exhaling. "Y'know, I never thought I'd settle anywhere. Not really."

Bolin raised an eyebrow. "That so? Where'd you come from, anyway?"

Gorrin stared into his mug for a moment before speaking.

"I was born in a small forest dwelling, east of here. Not much more than a our simple hut , tucked away in the trees. My parents were hunters, lived off the land. Not rich, not poor, just… livin'."

He paused, eyes distant, as if seeing something long gone.

"One day, a sickness came. Took my ma first, then my pa, before I was old enough to know what it meant to be alone. I had no reason to stay."

Sigrid frowned, her usual sharp tongue silent for once.

"So I left," Gorrin continued, voice gruff. "Walked the roads, slept under trees, hunted for my meals. Did it for so long, it just became… how I lived. Never stayed anywhere for more than a season, never built anything, never wanted to."

He took another long drink.

"Then I found this place. Looked good. Strong. Figured I'd try settlin' down for once. Built a house, one thing led to another, and now… this." He gestured around the tavern, the village, the life they had made.

Bolin nodded slowly. "You did more than settle, Gorrin. You built."

Gorrin grunted. "Aye. Guess I did."

Bolin leaned back, exhaling. "Well, since we're tellin' tales, might as well tell mine."

Harvin grinned. "This oughta be good."

Bolin smiled. "I come from Ironhold, a mountain settlement further south. Not a big city like Dumgral'dur, but a stronghold, built into the rock, near the old iron mines. My da was a blacksmith, good with his hands, made some of the best weapons in the region."

He shook his head. "Thing was, Ironhold never had much peace. Too many raiders, bandits, fools who thought we had gold worth stealin'. One day, they hit hard. Too hard."

His voice darkened.

"They burned our homes, killed my da, took whatever wasn't nailed down. I fought, but… I had a wife, two kids. Couldn't stay. Had to leave."

Sigrid reached for his hand, giving it a gentle squeeze.

"So we ran. Found a caravan, traveled north, and kept goin' till we found this place. Figured it was as good a spot as any to start over." He sighed. "Turns out, I was right."

Gorrin lifted his mug. "To startin' over."

They all clinked mugs, drinking deep.

"Well, my story ain't as grim as yours lot," Harvin smiled. "But it ain't much prettier either."

Gorrin chuckled. "Let's hear it then."

Harvin grinned, swirling his drink. "I was born in Dumgral'dur. Not in the rich parts, mind you—down near the forges, where the air's thick with smoke and the streets are always dirty. My pa was a miner, ma worked in a tannery. We didn't have much, but we had enough."

He leaned forward. "Thing is, I never wanted that life. Never wanted to dig rock till my fingers bled, never wanted to hammer steel for some noble's war. So when I got old enough, I… found other ways to make coin."

Bolin smiled. "Let me guess—gambling? Stealing? Conning drunkards?"

Harvin grinned, raising his hands. "Hey now, let's call it trade. I ran dice games, played cards, maybe borrowed a few things that weren't properly watched."

Sigrid rolled her eyes. "You were a bloody thief."

"Aye," Harvin laughed. "But a damn bad one. Did not make enough coin, slept in the gutters, but at least I did not break my back in the mines."

His smile faded slightly. "But city life ain't fair and it is too much noise. I was looking for a more quiet way of life… it was time to leave."

Gorrin chuckled. "So you ran?"

Harvin shrugged. "Call it early retirement. Came out here, figured a new village was the perfect place to start fresh. Never thought I'd swing a hammer for a living, but here we are."

He took a deep gulp of ale, slamming his mug down. "And you know what? I don't regret it."

Bolin grinned. "We'll see if you still say that when you're hammerin' nails in the rain."

"Long as there's ale at the end of it," Harvin laughed, "I'll manage."

The mugs kept filling, the laughter grew louder, and the tales continued—stories of old battles, lost loves, foolish bets, and hard-won victories.

As the night stretched on, Gorrin looked around at his friends, at the life they had built, and thought:

For the first time in years… I belong.

The morning sun cast long shadows over the Stonebrook training field, a clearing just beyond the village where the men practiced their drills. The air smelled of sweat, steel, and damp earth, and the clang of weapons echoed between the trees.

Gorrin and Captain Torgun stood in the center, surrounded by the gathered villagers, wooden practice swords in hand. The lesson had begun like any other—footwork, striking angles, and defensive maneuvers. But soon enough, an argument sparked.

"You're leaving your side open when you swing wide!" Torgun barked.

Gorrin scoffed, rolling his shoulders. "Only if you ain't strong enough to finish the strike."

Torgun narrowed his eyes. "Strength ain't everything, lad."

"Aye, but it damn sure helps," Gorrin shot back.

The two squared up, tension rising.

"Alright, tough lad," Torgun smiled, tossing aside his wooden sword. "Let's see what that strength of yours is really worth."

The villagers gathered around, betting mugs of ale on who'd win. Torgun cracked his knuckles, confident, stepping lightly on his feet. He was older, but experienced, his grizzled face marked with the scars of battle.

Gorrin, built like a bear, squared his stance. A thick black beard, dark eyes, and a barrel-like chest—he was a wall of muscle and brute force.

Torgun attacked first, fast and precise, aiming for pressure points, weak spots. Gorrin dodged the first blow, but took a sharp punch to the ribs. He grunted, stepping back, then came back with a massive swing of his sword.

Torgun dodged—barely.

The captain was quick, clever, but Gorrin was relentless. Blow after blow, he pressed forward, forcing Torgun back. A strike to the stomach, a hook to the jaw—Torgun stumbled.

Then Gorrin tackled him full-force, sending the older warrior crashing into the dirt. In a second Gorrins blade was at his throat.

The villagers erupted in cheers.

Torgun, flat on his back, coughed out a laugh. His pride was bruised, but he wasn't the type to sulk. He wiped the blood from his lip, shaking his head.

"Well, shit, lad," he muttered, staring up at the sky. "Looks like you're better than me now."

Gorrin extended a scarred hand, pulling Torgun up.

Torgun clapped a hand on Gorrin’s massive shoulder. "Guess that means you’re in charge of training now."

Gorrin smiled. "Aye, don’t you worry—I’ll whip ‘em into shape."

From that day, Gorrin took over the training.

He drilled the villagers harder than ever, turning farmers and builders into proper fighters. He wasn’t just teaching swordplay anymore—he was building warriors.

And while he taught them with blades, he himself took to a new weapon— the warhammer.

Something about it felt right. The weight, the crushing force, the way it could break through armor like splitting firewood.

By the end of the season, Gorrin could arm-wrestle any man in the village and win.

One morning, Gorrin took his bow, his sword, and disappeared into the deep woods.

The forest was thick and shadowed, the leaves rustling with the morning breeze. He moved carefully, his heavy boots stepping lightly, his breath slow and controlled.

Tracking was an art.

He crouched, running his calloused fingers over a fresh deer print in the mud. Nearby, the bark on a tree had been rubbed smooth by antlers—a good sign.

He moved with patience, weaving through the trees. The smell of rich earth, pine, and damp moss filled the air.

Then—movement.

A flicker of brown between the trees.

Gorrin lowered himself, pressing his back against an old oak. Slowly, he nocked an arrow, pulling the bowstring back, muscles tensing.

His eyes locked onto his prey.

A large buck, standing just ahead, sniffing the air. It hadn’t seen him yet.

Gorrin took a slow breath.

Then—he loosed the arrow.

Gorrin's arrow flew wide, slicing through the air but missing the buck entirely. The deer jerked upright, ears twitching, eyes wide with alarm. Then, in a blur of muscle and hooves, it bolted through the trees, disappearing into the thick underbrush.

"Bah!" Gorrin spat, lowering his bow. "Damn thing moved too quick."

But the hunt wasn’t over. The thrill coursed through him. He wasn’t about to let the beast slip away that easily.

He bent low, scanning the forest floor for fresh tracks. Hoofprints dug into the soft earth, leading deeper into the dense woodland. Gorrin followed them, weaving through towering pines and gnarled oaks, stepping lightly over roots and fallen leaves.

Time stretched as he tracked the deer. His breath slowed, his senses sharpened. The forest was alive around him—the chirp of birds, the distant rustle of small creatures moving through the brush. But after nearly an hour, the tracks became harder to follow.

Gorrin exhaled heavily and sat on a fallen log, resting his hands on his knees.

"Guess I lost this one," he muttered.

A Hunt

Just as he was about to head back toward the village, he heard it—a rustling in the brush. Not the quick, light steps of a deer. No, this was heavier, deliberate.

Gorrin’s hand went instinctively to his sword hilt.

Then—three figures stepped into view.

Orcs.

Tall, broad, their greenish-gray skin marked with scars and crude tattoos. Yellowed tusks curled from their lower jaws, and their small, dark eyes gleamed with cruel amusement.

One of them—a brute with a notched axe on his back—grinned.

"What do we have here?" the orc sneered. "A lost little dwarf, wandering too far from his cave?"

The second orc, leaner, with a jagged scar across his chest, laughed. "What’re you doin’ out here, stump? Hunting rabbits?"

The third orc, silent but watchful, rested a rusty sword against his shoulder, his beady eyes studying Gorrin.

Gorrin’s anger flared.

"Just mindin’ my own trade," he said, voice low, controlled. "Maybe you should do the same."

The first orc grinned wider, stepping closer. "Oh, but I like our trade just fine. You see, we don’t take kindly to little bearded folk sniffin’ around our woods. Maybe you should hand over that fancy sword, those shiny boots—hell, might as well strip right down and leave with nothin’."

The other two chuckled darkly.

Gorrin’s grip tightened on his sword hilt.

"No," he said simply.

The orcs stiffened.

The first one, the biggest, his amusement vanished. "No?"

"You deaf, tusker?" Gorrin stood, rolling his broad shoulders. "I said no."

The air thickened.

The orcs tensed, hands going to their weapons.

Gorrin felt it coming.

There was no way out of this but blood.

The first orc lunged, swinging his axe in a brutal arc—but Gorrin sidestepped, fast, and drove his sword deep into the orc’s side.

A howl of pain.

The orc staggered, clutching his bleeding ribs.

The second orc struck next, hacking downward with his curved blade. Gorrin blocked with his sword, sparks flying as metal clashed against metal. The force drove him back, but he gritted his teeth and countered—his sword slicing across the orc’s thigh.

The orc roared, stumbling, but Gorrin didn’t stop.

He bashed the hilt of his sword into the orc’s jaw, sending him sprawling into the dirt.

The third orc, the silent one, took his chance—charging from behind.

Gorrin barely turned in time. The orc’s blade slashed across his neck, shallow but burning.

Gorrin grunted in pain, staggering forward. His hand went to his throat—warm blood slicked his fingers.

The orc grinned, thinking the fight was turning.

But Gorrin wasn’t done.

Fueled by rage and pain, he charged forward, crashing into the orc like a boulder rolling down a mountain. The orc stumbled back—and that's all the opening Gorrin needed.

He swung his sword with all his strength.

The blade cleaved straight through the orc's collarbone, nearly splitting him in two. Blood splattered across the forest floor, and the orc collapsed in a gurgling heap.

The first orc, still clutching his ribs, tried to run. Bad mistake.

Gorrin grabbed a fallen axe from the ground and hurled it. It buried deep in the orc's back. He crashed forward, dead.

The last orc, the one with the cut leg, was on his knees, panting, watching his comrades bleed out.

Gorrin wiped blood from his mouth, his face bruised, his nose trickling red.

"You made a mistake comin' at me," he growled.

The orc spat, grinning weakly. "Might be. But more of us are out there, dwarf. You'll see."

Gorrin's sword silenced him.

Breathing heavily, Gorrin wiped his blade clean. His neck burned, the cut wasn't deep, but it stung like hell. His nose dripped blood, but nothing felt broken.

He searched the orcs' bodies.

15 silver coins, a crude sword, and a battered shield.

"Better than nothin'," he muttered.

With a final spit on the corpses, he turned and began the slow walk home.

By the time he reached Stonebrook, the sky had turned orange, the smell of hearthfires rising into the cooling air.

Gorrin limped back to his house, sore, covered in blood—some his, some not.

He went straight to his cellar, grabbed a cold mug of ale, and slumped into his wooden chair.

He reached for his clay pipe, packed it with fresh hemp, and lit it.

The sweet smoke filled his lungs.

He sat back, exhaling, the warm ale washing away the taste of blood.

Just another damn day in the wild.

It was a fine sunny day, the kind where the breeze was light, the air smelled of earth, and the sky stretched endlessly above the rolling green fields.

Gorrin stood at the edge of his small field, gripping a wooden plow attached to the village's sturdy bull. The beast huffed, pulling forward, its hooves sinking deep into the dirt as Gorrin guided it, breaking the ground for new crops.

"Come on, you stubborn lump of meat," Gorrin grumbled, giving the bull a solid pat on the flank.

The beast snorted but kept moving.

By midday, the field was plowed and seeded. Sweat clung to his thick black beard, but he felt satisfied.

Next, he moved to his garden, pulling fresh carrots, onions, and turnips from the soil. He rubbed the dirt off on his pants, sniffing one of the onions. "Aye, that's a strong one," he muttered.

With arms full of vegetables, he made his way to his cellar.

Inside, the cool air greeted him, thick with the smell of smoked meat and stored goods. He grabbed a few potatoes and a slab of cured venison.

Back in his home, he set to work, cutting the vegetables into thick chunks, tossing them into a pot of boiling water. He threw in salt, dried herbs, and thick slices of smoked meat, letting the flavors meld together.

When it was done, he sat back with a deep wooden bowl, eating in big hearty bites.

"Now that's a damn fine meal," he muttered between mouthfuls.

With his stomach full, he grabbed his axe and headed into the woods.

The trees stood tall and ancient, their canopies swaying gently. Gorrin selected a thick pine, swinging his axe in steady, powerful strokes. The wood cracked, groaned, then fell with a mighty crash.

By the time he had enough logs, the sun was dipping lower.

He wiped his brow, grabbed his fishing gear, and made his way to the river.

The water was clear, the trout darting below the surface. Gorrin set his line, waited patiently, and before long, he felt a strong tug.

"Gotcha, you slippery bastard," he grinned, hauling the fish out.

A fat trout, scales glistening in the sunlight. He held it firm, squeezed its belly, and fresh, glistening caviar spilled out into his palm.

Without hesitation, he tilted his hand and let the salty pearls slide into his mouth.

"Now that's the taste of a good day," he muttered.

Satisfied, he stripped off his shirt and boots and dove into the cool water, letting it wash away the sweat and grime of the day.

Later that evening, Gorrin made his way back to the village, stopping by Ildera's house.

Ildera was a sturdy, red-haired dwarf woman, sharp-tongued but quick to smile. She stood by her hen coop, gathering fresh eggs in a small woven basket.

"Oi, Gorrin," she greeted, hands on her hips. "You come for eggs, or you just lookin' for an excuse to see me?"

Gorrin smiled. "Can't it be both?"

She raised an eyebrow but handed him three eggs. "Here. That'll be two silvers."

Gorrin scoffed. "Two silvers? What, these hens lay gold eggs now?"

Ildera laughed, shaking her head. "You drive a hard bargain, Gorrin. Fine. One silver."

He grinned, dropping a coin into her palm. "Much better."

She crossed her arms. "What else you want, then?"

Gorrin leaned slightly, voice lower. "Maybe some company for supper."

She pretended to consider it, tapping her chin.

"Hmm… and what's in it for me?"

"A fine meal. Maybe some good ale. Maybe… better company than you're used to."

Ildera laughed, shaking her head. "You're full of yourself, you know that?"

"Aye," Gorrin smiled.

She chuckled. "Alright then, I'll bring some chicken meat over. But only 'cause I'd rather eat with you than listen to my hens cluck all night."

Gorrin winked. "Fair trade."

She turned to leave, then glanced back over her shoulder.

"Don't burn the damn meal before I get there."

He chuckled, watching her disappear into the village.

The day had been long, full of work. But the night promised good food and good drink.

As the evening deepened, a knock came at Gorrin’s door. He opened it to see Ildera standing there, a basket of fresh-cut chicken meat in one hand, a bottle of ale in the other.

"Hope you ain’t burnt everything yet," she smiled, stepping inside.

Gorrin grinned, closing the door behind her. "Not yet. Figured I’d let you handle the delicate bits."

They set to work in the warm glow of the hearth, preparing their evening feast. Ildera plucked fresh herbs from a bundle on the shelf, crushing them in her calloused hands, releasing their sharp, earthy aroma. Gorrin peeled and sliced potatoes, tossing them into a heavy iron pot with a dollop of butter. Ildera seasoned the chicken, rubbing it with salt, wild garlic, and a bit of ale for richness. Gorrin set the meat on a spit, turning it slowly over the fire, the fat dripping onto the hot coals, sending a mouthwatering scent through the house.

As the food cooked, they poured mugs of ale, clinking them together.

"Ain’t every night I get to eat something better than my own damn cooking," Ildera admitted.

"Ain’t every night I get company," Gorrin replied, his dark eyes gleaming in the firelight.

After the meal, they sat by the hearth, mugs in hand, the warm glow casting shadows across the wooden walls.

They talked—about village life, old stories, jokes from the tavern. But as the night grew quieter, Gorrin’s gaze lingered on Ildera, the way the fire reflected in her eyes, the way her lips curled slightly when she smiled.

Without thinking much of it, he leaned in.

She didn’t pull away.

Their lips met, slow at first, then hungry, urgent.

Ildera gripped his beard, pulling him closer, and soon, they were tangled together, moving toward the wooden bed against the wall.

Clothes were discarded, hands explored, and in the flickering glow of the fire, they came together, their bodies moving as one, lost in the heat of the moment.

Gorrin awoke to the scent of lingering embers and the soft weight of Ildera beside him.

She stirred, stretched, then sat up, brushing red hair from her face.

"I best be off," she muttered, pulling on her shirt and boots. "Got things to do, and if I stay too long, the hens’ll think I’m dead."

Gorrin smiled but said nothing, watching as she slung her belt over her hips.

Before leaving, she leaned down, giving him a quick, playful kiss.

"See you ‘round, Gorrin."

And with that, she was gone.

With the house quiet again, Gorrin decided to take a swim, washing away the sweat of the night.

The river was crisp, cool, and as he dove beneath the surface, he let himself drift, feeling the weight of everything fade.

He swam for a time, dried off, then headed home.

That’s when he heard it. A scream.

Gorrin grabbed his sword, his heart pounding, and stormed outside.

A dozen orcs stood at the edge of the village, their broad, brutish forms towering over the villagers. Some held rusted axes, others long spears, their yellowed teeth bared in snarls.

Behind them, villagers had already armed themselves—Bolin, Harvin, and the other men stood ready, swords drawn, axes raised.

At the center of the orc pack, a hulking brute stepped forward, his massive battle-scarred chest rising and falling with heavy breaths. His dark eyes locked onto Gorrin.

"You," the orc growled, pointing a thick finger at him.

Gorrin held his ground, blade in hand.

"What about me?" he spat.

The orc leader stepped forward, gripping his massive cleaver-like sword.

"Three of our kin were cut down in the woods. Hacked to pieces." His voice rumbled like distant thunder.

The orcs gripped their weapons tighter.

"Tell me, dwarf," the orc leader growled, baring his tusks. "Who killed them?"

Silence.

The village men shifted uneasily, eyes flicking between each other.

Gorrin said nothing, simply rolling his shoulders, adjusting his grip on his sword.

The orc leader snorted, scanning the villagers.

"No one speaks?" He let out a low chuckle. "Then we'll burn this place to the ground, and sort through the ashes."

His warriors roared in agreement, raising their weapons.

Bolin gritted his teeth, stepping forward. "We've done nothing to you! Take your fight somewhere else."

The orc leader grinned. "Ain't how it works, dwarf. We take what we want, and right now, we want blood."

Gorrin exhaled slowly, feeling the old familiar fire of battle rise in his gut.

"Then I reckon we got a problem."

The orc leader's grin faded.

"Aye," he said, lifting his sword. "That we do."

The air grew thick. The moment hung on a knife's edge. Then—with a roar, the orcs charged.

The battle erupted in a storm of steel and blood.

The orcs charged, their rusted blades flashing in the sunlight, their war cries shaking the ground. The village men met them head-on, swords clashing, axes biting into flesh, shields shattering under brute strength.

The first to fall was Gundrik, a burly farmer with a heavy woodcutter's axe. An orc's spear drove straight through his gut, his eyes wide in shock before he collapsed in the dirt, blood pooling beneath him.

Across the field, Svenna, one of the village women who had taken up a spear, fought valiantly—but an orc's blade swept across her throat, and she fell soundlessly, clutching her gaping wound before life fled from her eyes.

A third man, Dorin, a young lad barely past twenty, tried to swing his sword, but an orc's massive club caved in his skull with a sickening crunch.

Gorrin saw it all—and his blood boiled.

Gorrin roared, swinging his warhammer in a wide arc, catching an orc square in the ribs. The beast howled as bone shattered, collapsing to its knees just in time for Gorrin's sword to take its head clean off.

Another orc came at him, swinging a jagged cleaver.

Gorrin ducked, spun, and drove his sword up through the orc's stomach.

The beast choked, blood spilling from its lips, as Gorrin kicked him off the blade.

Nearby, Bolin and Harvin fought side by side, their backs to each other, taking down orcs together.

Bolin swung his axe, splitting an orc's shoulder open, while Harvin drove a dagger into another's throat.

"For Stonebrook!" Bolin roared, hacking down another enemy.

"For the ale we won't get to drink if we die!" Harvin yelled, spitting blood.

But the battle turned against them.

A massive orc wielding a spiked mace swung at Bolin, the heavy weapon crashing into his skull. Bolin crumpled, blood streaming from his scalp, knocked out cold.

"NO!" Harvin bellowed, driving his blade deep into another orc.

But then—a brutal backhand from a shield caught Harvin in the face.

His head snapped back, blood spurting from his nose and ears. The same orc kicked him hard in the ribs, and Harvin crashed to the ground, coughing blood.

"Harvin!" Gorrin turned, but it was too late.

His moment of distraction cost him.

An orc's shield slammed into his head.

CRACK.

Gorrin's vision blurred, his ears rang, and then—the ground met him, hard.

Lying in the dirt, blood trickling from his temple, Gorrin felt the battle slipping away.

He saw the village men struggling, their weapons heavy in their hands, their bodies failing them. The orcs were stronger, brutal, relentless.

Stonebrook was about to fall. Something snapped inside him. Gorrin let out a roar of pure fury. He pushed himself up, blood streaming down his face, his eyes burning with rage. "You filthy green bastards!" he bellowed, gripping his warhammer with both hands.

He charged.

His first swing took an orc's jaw clean off, sending teeth and gore flying.

His second blow crushed another's skull, the warhammer sinking deep.

An orc tried to run—Gorrin grabbed him by the throat, hoisted him into the air, and drove his sword through his gut, twisting it savagely.

More villagers, inspired by his berserk rage, fought harder.

Bolin, barely conscious, forced himself to his feet, swinging his axe weakly.

Harvin, coughing blood, stabbed an orc through the knee before getting kicked aside.

The last three orcs tried to flee.

Gorrin wasn’t having it.

He grabbed a fallen spear, hurled it, and it pierced through the back of one cowardly orc.

The last two turned just in time for Gorrin’s warhammer to find them.

A sickening CRUNCH—and they were no more.

The Aftermath Silence fell. The village was painted in blood.

Gorrin panted, his chest rising and falling heavily. He looked around—the ground littered with bodies, both orc and dwarf alike.

Bolin groaned, rubbing his aching head. Harvin sat against a barrel, wheezing, his face a mess of blood and bruises. "That…" Harvin coughed. "…wasn’t fun."

Bolin spat blood onto the dirt. "I hate orcs." Gorrin wiped his blade on a dead orc’s tunic, breathing heavily.

"Get the wounded to the tavern," he said, voice like gravel. "Bury the dead. And someone get me a godsdamned drink."

No one argued. The battle was won—barely.

As the sun rose over the blood-stained village, Gorrin stood at the center of the battlefield, staring down at the lifeless orcs. Their corpses reeked of sweat, blood, and death.

Without a word, he grabbed one of their severed heads by the greasy hair and jammed it onto a wooden pole.

With a grunt, he smashed the pole deep into the ground, planting it at the village’s edge—a warning to any more of their kind who might come sniffing around.

"Come again, and you’ll rot the same way."

The villagers, weary and wounded, said nothing, but there was a silent agreement among them. Stonebrook had held its ground.

The village was slow to recover. Harvin’s ribs mended, but he still walked with a stiffness, rubbing his side when he thought no one was looking. Bolin’s head wound healed, though he swore he still heard ringing in his ears. The other men who had fought bore their scars, but they returned to work, slowly but surely.

Gorrin himself healed in silence. His body ached, his knuckles stiff with dried blood, but he buried the pain deep, where it wouldn't show.

Instead, he took up another grim duty—burying the dead.

He dug three graves by hand, sweat mixing with dirt, his arms aching with every strike of the shovel. When it was done, he placed three large stones at their heads, simple and strong.

With a hunting knife, he carved their names into the stone, a small way to honor their sacrifice.

The first graveyard of Stonebrook was formed.

After that, the village settled back into rhythm.

After weeks of rebuilding, Gorrin decided it was time for another trip to Dumgral'dur.

He saddled the village's cart, filled a small sack with coin from the last trade, and rode toward the mountain city.

The air was thick with the scent of roasted meat, fresh bread, and smoldering forge fires as Gorrin walked through the crowded streets.

He stopped by the spice merchant, a sharp-eyed dwarf with thin fingers and a knowing smile.

"Ah, traveler!" the merchant greeted. "Looking to bring some fire to your ale, eh?"

Gorrin grunted. "Something strong. Maybe something with a bite."

The merchant grinned and handed him a pouch of dark red spice.

"Crushed fire-root," the merchant said. "Mix it in, let it sit a few weeks. You'll feel it in your chest and your gut."

Gorrin nodded, handing over a few silvers.

Next, he stopped at a stall selling seeds and saplings. He picked out a few sacks of grain seed for the fields and some strong apple and pear saplings.

The merchant, a plump dwarf with a wild beard, inspected Gorrin closely.

"You planning to feed a village, or start an orchard?"

Gorrin smiled. "Bit of both."

After a long day of trading, Gorrin pulled his tired frame into The Thin Bear Tavern.

The smell of ale and tobacco smoke greeted him as he threw a silver on the counter.

"Ale," he said simply.

The innkeeper, recognizing him, chuckled. "Back again? Thought you'd had enough excitement, Gorrin."

"Not yet," Gorrin muttered, gulping down the cold, frothy ale.

The innkeeper leaned on the bar, smiling. "So, you hear about the mad tinker down in the lower district?"

Gorrin raised a brow. "What about him?"

"Bloke's been trying to build a machine that brews ale faster than any dwarf can. Claims it'll revolutionize taverns."

Gorrin scoffed. "That so? And how's it workin' for him?"

The innkeeper chuckled. "It exploded. Damn thing blew half his roof off, nearly took out the smith next door."

Gorrin barked a laugh. "Hah! Serves him right. Ale's meant to be brewed, not conjured."

As Gorrin finished his second mug, a broad-shouldered dwarf slid onto the stool next to him. His clothes were caked in dust, and his hands were thick with callouses.

"You're from that village, yeah? Stonebrook?" the miner asked.

Gorrin eyed him. "Aye. Who's askin'?"

"The name's Harkun. I work in the deep mines, near the old caverns. Word is, your lot's got strong hands and ain't afraid of a little work."

Gorrin took another slow drink. "And?"

Harkun leaned in. "We need extra men. The mine's expanding. Pay's good, and there's iron to be pulled from the stone."

Gorrin thought for a moment, running his fingers over the rim of his mug.

"Good pay, huh?"

Harkun grinned. "Aye. Hard work, but steady coin."

Gorrin grunted, leaning back. "Not today. Got my own work to do."

Harkun shrugged. "Suit yourself. But if you ever get sick of swinging an axe at trees, come find me."

Gorrin nodded, watching as the miner walked off.

After another drink, he called one of the barmaids over.

"Looking for company tonight?" she asked, placing a soft hand on his arm.

Gorrin smiled. "Aye. And maybe a little quiet, too."

She chuckled. "For the right price, I can be whatever you need."

Gorrin flipped her a silver, then followed her upstairs, into the dim candlelight of the rented rooms.

Tomorrow, he'd head back to Stonebrook.

Tonight, he'd take what comfort he could.

The morning sun rose over Dumgral'dur's high stone walls as Gorrin left the Thin Bear Tavern, his head clear, his coin purse lighter, and his horse ready for the road. He climbed onto the cart, giving the reins a tug, and set off back to Stonebrook.

The weeks passed in steady work.

Gorrin tilled fields, chopped wood, tended the livestock, and honed his skills with the warhammer. Stonebrook was thriving, but something gnawed at the back of his mind—the need for more coin.

He thought long on it.

He could hunt more, trade more, even start his own smithy—but it wouldn't be fast enough.

One day, he hitched the cart, grabbed his gear, and rode back toward Dumgral'dur, straight for the mines.

The mine entrance was carved deep into the mountainside, massive stone archways lined with iron reinforcements. Two dwarven guards, clad in sturdy chainmail, stood at either side, nodding as Gorrin passed.

Inside, the air changed.

It was thick, damp, and heavy with the scent of earth, sweat, and burning torches. The tunnel sloped downward, opening into a massive cavern, lit only by oil lamps and the orange glow of forge fires.

Dwarves toiled away, their muscular forms glistening with sweat, hammers and pickaxes crashing against stone. The sounds of iron striking rock echoed through the deep, mixing with the creaking of wooden carts, the grunts of laborers, and the distant shouts of orders.

Mine tracks ran deep, rusted carts filled with ore, being hauled toward the surface by teams of exhausted dwarves. Pulley systems creaked under strain, moving heavy loads deeper into the labyrinth of tunnels.

The further in Gorrin walked, the hotter and darker it became.

Near the entrance to the deeper tunnels, a broad-shouldered dwarf with a thick silver beard barked orders. His arms were as thick as tree trunks, his face covered in coal dust and sweat. He wore a heavy leather apron and carried a massive iron hammer.

This was Thormek Stonebrow—the mine overseer.

"You lookin’ for work?" Thormek growled, eyeing Gorrin up and down.

"Aye," Gorrin nodded. "I need to earn some coin."

Thormek spat into the dirt and crossed his arms. "You ever mined before?"

"No," Gorrin admitted. "But I know how to swing a hammer, and I ain’t afraid of hard work."

The overseer snorted. "Well, you’ll have plenty of both here. Pay’s four silvers a week, two meals a day while you work. You haul ore, swing your pick, and don’t die. That’s the job."

Gorrin grunted. "Sounds fair."

Thormek smiled. "Then grab a pick, lad. Let’s see what you’re made of."

Gorrin was handed a heavy pickaxe, its handle smooth from years of use. He was sent deep into the tunnels, where black rock glistened with veins of iron.

"Strike at the weak spots," a grizzled miner beside him muttered. "Watch for cracks in the stone—hitting ‘em right makes the work easier."

Easier was a damn lie. The first swing jarred his entire arm, sending pain up his shoulder.

By the tenth swing, his back ached. By the twentieth, he was drenched in sweat.

He hacked away at the stone, chipping chunks free, then bent down to haul them into a wooden cart. Each piece of ore was heavy, the metal glinting dully under the torchlight.

Hours passed.

He wiped grit from his brow, dirt smeared across his face, but he kept at it.

Pick. Haul. Load. Repeat. The heat was unbearable. Dust coated his tongue. But he endured. By the time the first shift ended, he was covered in soot, sweat, and sore muscles.

Thormek clapped him on the back. "Still alive?"

Gorrin grunted. "Aye."

The overseer laughed. "Then get some food and get your arse back here tomorrow."

For weeks, Gorrin worked the mines by day and returned to Stonebrook by night. Each morning, he woke before dawn, hitched his horse to the cart, and drove back to Dumgral’dur.

Each evening, he hauled himself home, his body aching, his hands raw. He earned his silver, and saved it, every coin one step closer to something more.

Gorrin had always dreamed of living in Dumgral'dur. But coin was needed—honest coin.

He could have turned to crime, like many who couldn't afford city life. He could have robbed, smuggled, cheated. But Gorrin wasn't that kind of dwarf.

If he was going to make it in the city, it would be with his own hands, his own sweat.

And so, he swung his pick, loaded his carts, and dreamed of the day he'd have his own home inside the mountain city. One day.

Years had passed, and Gorrin had become one with the mines.

The pickaxe felt natural in his hands now, the once-agonizing weight of the tool now just part of the rhythm of the work. He had grown stronger, his arms thick with muscle, his back hardened from the toil of hauling ore day after day.

The heat, the dust, the weight of the stone—it no longer bothered him. This was his life now.

His savings had grown, silver coin stacked away piece by piece, each shift bringing him closer to something greater.

He had thought long on it.

Stonebrook was his home, but the city called to him.

The buzz of Dumgral'dur, the life, the endless opportunities.

He had enough silver now to consider moving to the slums—one step closer to the life he had always wanted.

But it still wasn't enough.

Not quite.

One day, deep in the mines, Gorrin was working a stubborn chunk of stone, his pickaxe swinging hard, sweat running down his back.

His breath was steady, his motions practiced.

Then—CLINK.

The sound was different this time.

Not the dull thud of iron, but something sharper, lighter. He stopped, knelt down, and wiped dust from the stone. Something glittered faintly beneath the torchlight.

His eyes widened. It wasn't iron. It was silver. Not a full vein, not a fortune, but enough small pieces to matter.

Gorrin's heart pounded. He glanced left, then right, making sure the other miners were too busy to notice.

He quickly stashed the silver chunks into his pants, hiding them against his thigh.

It wasn't stealing. It was just taking what the mountain gave him. It was his work, his sweat —why shouldn't he have a little extra?

He finished his shift as usual, kept his head down, his mouth shut.

But when he left the mines that evening, he rode toward the land manager's office instead of heading home.

The land manager's office was a stone building near the center of Dumgral'dur, where trade and property were recorded.

Gorrin stepped inside, shaking dust from his boots.

Behind a heavy desk, a thin, sharp-eyed dwarf looked up, adjusting gold-rimmed spectacles.

"You lookin' to buy or sell?" the dwarf asked, barely looking up from his ledger.

"Sell," Gorrin grunted. "Got a cottage in Stonebrook. Built it myself."

The land manager raised a brow, flipping through a thick leather-bound book.

"Stonebrook, eh?" He scratched his beard. "Small village, but growing. Hm. Best offer I can give you is… 250 silver."

Gorrin considered.

It wasn't as much as the work he had put into it was worth, but it was coin in hand, and with the silver he had stashed from the mine, it would be enough.

"Deal," he said, slapping a thick, calloused hand onto the desk.

The land manager scribbled some notes, then handed over a small pouch, heavy with coin.

Gorrin tucked it into his belt pouch, feeling the weight of it.

For the first time in years, he was no longer a man with just a house in the village.

Now, he was a man with silver in his pocket and a future in the city.

The slums of Dumgral'dur were not the grand halls of the nobles, nor were they the sturdy homes of the merchant class.

Here, the streets were narrower, the buildings older, the air thick with the scent of sweat, smoke, and cheap ale.

But it was still part of the city. And that meant opportunity.

Gorrin walked through the muddy streets, past shoddy wooden signs, ragged merchants selling fish and stale bread, beggars leaning against the stone walls.

He didn't care. This was where he would start.

After some searching and bargaining, he found a humble home. One small room, with a stone hearth and a wooden floor, A sturdy door, though the locks were weak, Enough space for a bed, a workbench, and a chest for his tools.

It wasn't much—but it was his.

The price was fair, and with his silver and what he had hidden, he bought it outright.

The deed was signed, the key placed in his palm.

Gorrin stood outside, looking at the weathered stone walls, the small window barely big enough to let in proper light.

A rough place. But his place. That evening, he drove his cart back to Stonebrook one last time. The journey was quiet, the roads familiar, the trees whispering in the wind.

He didn't say much to the others, because he was to still visit the place as it was not far away.

Just packed his tools, his clothes, his old cooking pots and a few carved wooden trinkets he had made in his early days there.

Before he left, he stood by his old cottage one last time, running his fingers over the wooden frame he had built with his own hands. He took a deep breath.

Then, without another word, he climbed onto his cart and drove back toward the city. Toward Dumgral'dur.

Gorrin had settled into his new home in the slums of Dumgral'dur. Though it was small and rough, it was his, and each morning, as he stepped onto the muddy stone streets, he felt one step closer to something greater.

The mines had become his daily routine, the swing of the pickaxe and the clang of metal on rock as familiar as his own heartbeat. Each day, he labored, hauling ore, sweating under the torchlight, and earning his silver.

One morning, as he arrived at the mine entrance, his oversized hands gripping his pickaxe, he noticed Thormek Stonebrow, the overseer, waiting for him.

"Oi, Gorrin!" Thormek barked, waving him over.

Gorrin wiped sweat from his brow, setting his pickaxe on his shoulder. "Aye? What is it?"

"You're strong, and you ain't a fool," Thormek said gruffly. "I've got a task for you—tunnel inspection."

Gorrin frowned. "Thought I was here to pull ore, not play stone doctor."

The overseer smiled. "Aye, well, you keep swingin' blind, and one day the roof's gonna come down on your damn head. That's why we check the tunnels."

Gorrin nodded slowly. "Alright. What's the job?"

Thormek handed him a thick iron spike, a sturdy mallet, and a small chunk of charcoal.

"Your job is simple but important, lad." Thormek gestured toward the darkened tunnels beyond the main mining chamber. Walk through the tunnels. Look for cracks, loose stone, or unstable ceilings. Mark weak sections with charcoal, so the others know where to avoid digging. Hammer in support beams—either wooden braces or stone reinforcements. If a tunnel looks like it's gonna collapse, report it to me immediately.

"And if I'm under a tunnel when it collapses?" Gorrin grunted.

Thormek chuckled. "Then you won't be askin' stupid questions anymore. Now get movin'."

Gorrin grabbed a lantern, slung his mallet over his belt, and made his way deeper into the mine.

The air grew thick the further he walked, the torches flickering low, the walls damp and rough.

He ran his thick fingers along the stone, feeling for loose patches.

A faint crack ran along the ceiling of one of the side tunnels.

"That's not good," he muttered.

He took out his charcoal and marked the area with an "X".

Further in, he saw a section of tunnel that looked... wrong.

The stone had bulged slightly, meaning pressure was building.

"Better get some beams in here," he muttered.

Gorrin hauled heavy wooden beams from the storage area, stacking them one by one in the tunnel.

He set the first beam upright, holding it in place with one massive hand while he drove an iron spike through the base with his mallet.

THUNK. THUNK. THUNK.

The sound echoed, solid and strong.

Then, he hammered another support crosswise, forming a bracing structure.

By the time he was done, the tunnel felt safer. Not perfect, but better than before. As he worked, he heard footsteps behind him.

"Oi, you the one fixin' the tunnels?"

Gorrin turned, eyeing the newcomers.

Three dwarves stood there, each covered in grime and sweat from a long shift.

The first, a short, stocky dwarf with a thick red beard, smiled. "Name's Varric. You new to this?"

Gorrin grunted. "New to hammerin' beams? Maybe. New to swingin' hammers? No."

The second dwarf, a lanky, wiry fellow with coal-streaked skin, nodded. "Aye, well, good to have someone who knows not to let the damn ceiling fall in. Last week, a section collapsed, almost buried three of us."

Gorrin frowned. "Anyone killed?"

The third dwarf, a big, quiet brute named Droga, shook his head. "Just broken bones. Lucky."

Varric crossed his arms. "If you're gonna be workin' down here, might as well drink with us too. We meet at the Black Anvil tavern after shifts. You in?"

Gorrin smiled. "You buy the first round, and I'll think about it."

The three dwarves laughed.

"Fair enough, lad. Fair enough."

The day dragged on, filled with hammering, marking weak spots, and hauling beams through the tunnels.

By the time Gorrin returned to the surface, his back ached, his hands blistered, and his muscles burned.

But the work was good, honest.

He could feel it—coin was coming in, his life in Dumgral'dur was taking root.

After a long shift underground, drenched in sweat and covered in dust, Gorrin wiped his face with his sleeve and made his way to the Black Anvil Tavern.

The tavern stood in the heart of the miner’s district, a low, smoke-filled establishment where the ale was strong, the laughter loud, and the air thick with the scent of sweat, pipe smoke, and roasted meat.

Inside, lanterns flickered against soot-stained walls, illuminating tables crowded with off-duty miners.

At the bar, Varric, Droga, and the wiry dwarf named Kolm were already seated, mugs of black mountain ale in hand.

"About time, Gorrin!" Varric bellowed, waving him over. "Was beginnin’ to think you’d gone soft on us!"

Gorrin grunted, slumping into a chair. "If I were soft, I wouldn’t be doin’ your damn job for you."

Laughter erupted around the table, mugs clanking together.

Kolm smiled. "First round’s on me, lads. Black mountain ale all around."

A barmaid placed a heavy wooden mug in front of Gorrin, the dark ale frothing at the top.

He lifted it, took a long, slow gulp, and let out a deep sigh.

"Damn, that’s good."

"Good?" Droga chuckled, lifting his own mug. "That’s the taste of a day well wasted underground, lad."

They drank, laughed, shared stories of the mines—the fights, the dangers, the close calls.

At one point, Varric leaned in, nudging Gorrin with his elbow.

"You ever think about takin’ a cut on the side?" he muttered, voice low. "Plenty of precious ore down there if you know where to look."

Gorrin raised a brow, but shook his head. "Ain’t about to get my arse tossed in the city dungeons over a handful of silver."

Varric smiled, leaning back. "Suit yourself. But a smart dwarf knows when to take what’s right under his nose."

Gorrin didn’t respond, but he felt the thought stick in his mind.

The ale flowed, the night passed, and before long, Gorrin found himself staggering back to his small stone house, ready for another hard day in the mines.

The next morning, Gorrin shook off the grogginess of ale and arrived at the mines, ready for another shift.

Thormek, the overseer, was waiting for him near the entrance, arms crossed.

"Right, Gorrin. No hammer-swingin' for you today. You're on cart duty."

Gorrin frowned. "Cart duty? Thought I was here to break rock, not push wagons like a child."

Thormek snorted. "Aye, and the carts need haulin' so we don't drown in ore. You don't like it, take it up with the mountain itself."

Gorrin grumbled but took the job without complaint.

The mine carts were old, rusted from years of hauling heavy loads, the tracks worn and uneven.

His tasks for the day were to shovel iron ore into carts, ensuring even weight distribution so they wouldn't tip over. Grease the cart wheels, preventing jamming and squealing. Repair damaged tracks, hammering in new spikes and wooden supports where needed.

Gorrin grabbed a shovel, stepping up to the piles of freshly mined ore.

The first few loads were heavy, the weight sinking deep into his muscles, but he worked with steady efficiency, moving shovelful after shovelful into the waiting carts.

Kolm, working nearby, grunted as he wiped sweat from his brow.

"This job's a bastard, but at least it ain't tunnel duty," Kolm muttered.

Gorrin chuckled. "Aye, and at least if the roof falls in, it won't be on my damn head."

Kolm laughed. "Hah! You got that right."

The work continued without trouble until a sharp cracking sound echoed through the tunnels.

Gorrin froze, ears trained.

Then—a chunk of stone broke free from the ceiling.

"LOOK OUT!"

The boulder crashed down, striking a worker nearby. The dwarf, a young miner named Halrik, let out a pained cry, his leg pinned beneath the rock.

Gorrin dropped his shovel, rushing over.

Kolm and Droga were already trying to move the stone, but it was too heavy.

Gorrin gritted his teeth and braced his shoulders against it.

"Lift on three!" he barked. "One… two… THREE!"

With a great heave, the three dwarves shoved the rock aside, freeing Halrik.

The young miner groaned, clutching his bloodied leg.

"Shit," Kolm muttered. "Looks bad."

"We need to get him to the healer," Gorrin said.

Droga hauled Halrik onto his back, and they rushed him to the surface, delivering him to one of the mine's healers.

"That leg's gonna take a few weeks to mend," the healer muttered, looking over the wound. "He's lucky it didn't crush the bone clean through."

Gorrin nodded, stepping outside the healer's hut, wiping his hands on his shirt.

The air was fresh, the city bustling, but he hardly noticed.

His mind was somewhere else.

As he leaned against a stone pillar, his thoughts drifted back to the day before.

The silver.

The pieces he had stashed away from the tunnel.

The temptation had come suddenly, almost like instinct.

Was it wrong?

Did it matter?

The city was built on gold and silver, and the dwarves who had the most lived above while the rest toiled in the dirt.

He thought of Varric's words from the tavern.

"A smart dwarf knows when to take what's right under his nose."

Gorrin scowled, rubbing his chin.

He had worked honestly his whole life, built everything with his own hands.

But how long would it take to truly rise in Dumgral'dur?

He glanced toward the mine entrance, where carts of iron ore were being hauled up, silver glinting faintly within.

The thought stayed with him.

The clang of pickaxes against stone echoed through the deep tunnels of Dumgral'dur's mines, the rhythmic strikes and grunts of labor filling the dark spaces.

Gorrin had been working on a support beam, his broad hands driving iron spikes into the stone, ensuring the tunnel wouldn't cave in.

Nearby, a miner named Brorik, a broad-shouldered, fiery-tempered dwarf, swung his pickaxe hard into the rock face.

CRACK.

The impact sent a jagged split through the stone, opening a small, jagged hole.

At first, it seemed like any other break in the rock. But then—

A horrible stench filled the tunnel, thick and suffocating, like rotting eggs mixed with burned earth.

Gorrin immediately froze. His eyes widened as a cold realization settled in his chest.

"STOP! EVERYONE STOP SWINGIN'!"

But the warning came too late.

Brorik, gasping, staggered backward, clutching his throat.

"The hell— I—" he choked, his knees buckling.

Gorrin rushed to catch him, but Brorik collapsed onto the ground, his eyes rolling back, body twitching violently.

The other miners began to panic as the air thickened, turning sour, thick, and deadly.

"FIRE-DAMP GAS!" shouted Varric, his voice cutting through the growing panic.

The moment the words left his lips, every dwarf went deadly still.

Fire-damp.

The invisible killer.

A single spark from a flint strike, a single torch igniting the fumes, and the whole tunnel would explode into a firestorm.

"NO TORCHES! NO SPARKS!" Gorrin bellowed, waving his arms. "DROP YER PICKS— GET BACK!"

The miners scrambled, some choking, others coughing violently, stumbling away from the expanding gas pocket.

Kolm, his eyes wide with fear, turned toward the mine entrance. "What do we do? We can’t just leave it like this!"

Gorrin ignored him for now, dropping to his knees beside Brorik’s body.

The dwarf lay still, his lips tinged blue, his chest no longer rising.

"Shit," Gorrin muttered, checking for a pulse. "He’s gone."

Brorik had choked to death in seconds.

Gorrin clenched his jaw, anger and frustration burning in his gut.

"No more! We ain't losin’ another one!"

He hauled Brorik's lifeless body onto his shoulders, his muscles burning under the dead weight, and turned toward the tunnel entrance.

"MOVE YER FEET! WE NEED TO VENT IT!"

Thormek, the mine overseer, came barreling down the tunnel, his face like thunder.

"Who the hell opened a pocket of fire-damp?!"

"Brorik," Gorrin grunted. "He didn’t know what he hit."

The overseer cursed loudly, then grabbed one of the younger dwarves by the collar. "Get to the surface! We need to open a venting shaft—NOW!"

The miners knew what that meant.

They needed to dig a controlled shaft, one that connected to another tunnel leading outside, where the gas could escape safely.

"But that could take days!" Kolm protested, eyes darting toward the gas pocket. "By then, it could spread!"

"And if we don’t do it right," Thormek snarled, "You’ll be breathing fire before you can say your own name!"

A murmur passed through the crew.

Some dwarves argued that gas pockets often meant deeper veins of precious metal.

"There could be silver or even gold deeper in!" One of the miners pointed out.

"But at what cost?" Gorrin growled, shifting Brorik’s body on his shoulder.

Silence.

Thormek snorted, running a hand over his grimy face. "Aye. We vent it. No more needless deaths."

Gorrin nodded and continued forward, carrying the body of his fallen comrade toward the mine entrance.

By the time Gorrin reached the surface, the cool air hit him like a hammer. He sucked in a deep breath, trying to wash the stench of fire-damp from his lungs.

The mine's healers rushed over, but one look at Brorik's lifeless form, and they shook their heads.

"Nothing we can do," one muttered, placing a hand over Brorik's chest.

Gorrin lowered him onto the ground, staring at his friend's dirt-covered face.

Brorik had been a tough bastard, always the first to crack a joke, the first to take the hardest job without complaint.

And now he was just another dead miner, buried in the depths of Dumgral'dur's hunger for metal.

Gorrin exhaled, looking back at the mine entrance, where the deadly gas still lingered in the shadows.

A dark thought crept into his mind.

"That could've been me."

That feeling—the edge between life and death—had stayed with him since he first started working in the mines.

And then another thought.

"What if there's more silver beyond that gas pocket?"

He shook the idea off.

For now.

But deep down, he knew…

Temptation was growing.

For days, the mine stood silent. No picks swinging, no carts clattering, no ore being hauled to the surface.

Instead, the dwarves worked tirelessly, digging the venting shaft, chiseling through stone, and reinforcing the passage with wooden beams. Some worked on the shaft itself, clearing the rock and widening the tunnel to connect it to the outer mine airways. Others hauled debris to

keep the work moving. Gorrin and the stronger miners hammered in thick support beams, ensuring the tunnel wouldn’t collapse before it was complete.

The days were long, grueling, but no one dared complain. Fire-damp was no joke, and every miner knew that if they didn't do this right, they could be digging their own graves.

Finally, after almost a full week, the shaft was completed.

With a final swing of the hammer, the last wooden support beam was secured, and the controlled airways began to vent out the deadly gas.

A deep whoosh echoed through the mine as fresh air swept through the tunnels, clearing out the poisonous fumes.

Thormek, the overseer, stood at the mine entrance, his arms crossed as he watched the air shift inside.

He inhaled deeply.

"Smells like work can finally begin again."

The next morning, the miners filed back into the tunnels, ready to get back to the grind.

Gorrin’s boots crunched against the stone floor as he walked through the cleared passage, his breath steady, his pickaxe slung over his shoulder.

Thormek waved him over.

"Gorrin, I got a new task for you."

Gorrin grunted. "Another cave-in waiting to happen?"

The overseer smiled. "Not this time. New tunnel. We need supports built, ore pulled, and carts loaded. You up for it?"

Gorrin rolled his shoulders, feeling the familiar strain of anticipation in his muscles.

"Aye," he said. "Sounds like a fine way to spend the day."

Gorrin got to work immediately.

First, he had to set up the wooden beams, ensuring the tunnel’s structure would hold as they dug deeper. He hauled thick logs from the supply stacks, gripping them with calloused hands and driving them into the rocky walls with heavy iron nails. His hammer slammed against the metal spikes, sending deep echoes down the tunnel as the beams locked into place. Once the supports were set, he picked up his pickaxe and swung at the wall, each strike sending dust and small shards of rock flying.

The work was brutal, sweat-dripping, but satisfying.

After a few hours, his shirt stuck to his back, his forearms covered in dust.

At midday, Gorrin took a break, stepping out into one of the wider tunnels where the air was cooler.

He grabbed his waterskin, tilted his head back, and drank deeply, letting the cold water soothe his parched throat.

Kolm, working nearby, leaned on his shovel. "Nothin' like cold water after a morning of breakin' stone."

Gorrin wiped his mouth. "Aye. Feels like you could drink a whole damn barrel after a day like this."

Droga, chewing on a strip of dried venison, grunted. "Rather have ale."

Gorrin chuckled, reaching into his leather pack for his lunch—a thick chunk of smoked pork and a slice of fresh bread.

He tore into the meat, chewing slowly, letting the salt and fat sit on his tongue. Nothing fancy, but it was good. Hard work, a full stomach, a deep drink of cold water. That was the life of a miner.

As the afternoon stretched on, Gorrin was deep in the tunnel, hauling loose rock and loading iron ore into the carts. His muscles burned, but he welcomed it. The strain, the ache—it meant progress. But as he worked, his thoughts drifted. *Silver.* He had seen a few flecks of it in the tunnels before. Small pieces, hidden within the stone.

He had took small pieces of them before.

He had told himself he was an honest dwarf, a hard worker, someone who didn't need to steal.

But then again…

What harm was there in taking what the stone gave him?

He imagined what it would be like…

No more cramped slum house, no more stiff old cot in the back of a dusty home. If he could find just a little silver, he could buy a proper home. Maybe open his own shop someday.

Maybe even leave the damn mines altogether. His fingers twitched as he swung his pickaxe. The thought wouldn't leave him.

Gorrin gritted his teeth, shaking his head.

"I'm no thief."

But was he? Was it stealing if the silver was just sitting there, waiting? If he ever found some… would he really leave it buried? Or would he take it?

He didn't have an answer. But the thought stayed with him, buried deep, just like the ore in the mountain.

On his first free day in weeks, Gorrin saddled his horse and cart, packed a few supplies, and set out on the familiar road back to Stonebrook.

The road was dusty but peaceful, winding through forested hills and open fields, the scent of wildflowers and pine in the air. As the village came into view, he saw the farms growing strong, the houses well-kept, and the tavern chimney smoking. Stonebrook was thriving.

As he rode into the village square, he spotted Bolin and Harvin near the tavern, sitting on a wooden bench, mugs of ale in hand.

Gorrin grinned, pulling the cart to a stop.

"By the gods," Harvin chuckled. "Look who's returned from his stone prison!"

Bolin smiled. "Thought city life had swallowed you whole, Gorrin."

Gorrin hopped down, clapping them both on the back. "Not yet. But I came for somethin' important."

Harvin raised a brow. "A wife? Some sense? A bath?"

Bolin laughed.

Gorrin grinned. "Better. Your damn fine ale."

Harvin's face lit up. "Hah! Knew you couldn't stay away forever!"

Inside the tavern, Gorrin sat with his old friends, a mug of thick Stonebrook ale in hand, the taste familiar and rich.

"So, how's life in the village?" Gorrin asked, tearing into a hunk of warm bread and smoked ham.

Bolin took a deep sip before answering. "Busy. More families settlin' in. We got more fields now, even started a second mill by the river."

Harvin nodded. "And Sigrid finally agreed to stop watering down the ale."

Gorrin chuckled. "That's the best news I've heard in weeks."

Harvin grinned. "What about you? Still hackin' away at the mines?"

Gorrin nodded. "Aye. Hard work, good coin. But I came today for this fine brew."

He dropped five silver on the table. "I'll take three barrels with me."

Bolin whistled. "Thirsty, are we?"

Gorrin smiled. "Always wanting some good ale."

After loading the barrels onto his cart, Gorrin set off back to Dumgral'dur, the road feeling lighter than usual.

At first, he had planned to keep the ale for himself, but as he neared his house in the slums, a new thought struck him.

"Ten coppers a mug... city dwarves would pay good coin for real village ale."

Gorrin grinned to himself.

By the time he arrived home, his mind was made up.

The next morning, Gorrin set up a simple wooden stand in front of his house. One of the barrels sat next to him, a heavy wooden tap already in place.

He carved a rough sign:

STONEBROOK ALE - 10 COPPERS A MUG

At first, no one stopped. But then—a curious miner walking by sniffed the air, recognizing the scent. "Wait a damn minute," the dwarf muttered. "That real Stonebrook brew?"

"Aye," Gorrin said, leaning on the barrel. "Better than the piss they serve in the city taverns."

The miner squinted, digging in his pouch before dropping 10 coppers on the stand. Gorrin poured a full mug, sliding it over. The dwarf took one sip, smacked his lips, and nodded. "By the gods, that's good." Soon enough, word spread.

Miners, smiths, laborers—they all came, dropping their coppers, drinking deep. In a few hours, one whole barrel was empty. Gorrin counted his earnings. 5 silver.

That was more than his weekly pay in the mines.

The next week, Gorrin was called into the overseer's office in the mines.

Thormek Stonebrow, the gruff, silver-bearded overseer, leaned against his desk, arms crossed.

"You've been puttin' in the work, Gorrin," he said, rubbing his chin. "New miners are comin' in, and we need to spread the shifts. You want a few extra free days? Work four days instead of six?"

Gorrin raised a brow. "Less coin, though."

"Aye," Thormek grunted. "Three silver a week instead of four. But more time for… whatever it is you do in the city."

Gorrin considered it.

Less coin from the mines… but he was already making more selling ale.

"I can sell at least a barrel a week—5 silver. That's 8 silver in total. More than what I was making before."

He grinned, giving a firm nod. "I'll take the deal."

Thormek smiled. "Figured you would. Get back to work."

Gorrin's new four-day work schedule didn't make the job any easier.

The day was grueling as always—heaving iron ore, hacking at rock walls, and reinforcing tunnels with thick wooden beams.

At one point, he paused to wipe the sweat from his forehead, grabbed his waterskin, and took a long, slow gulp.

Kolm, resting nearby, grinned. "Ain't nothin' like cold water when you feel like yer lungs are about to burst."

"Aye," Gorrin muttered, rolling his shoulders. "Though I'd rather be drinkin' ale."

Droga let out a dry chuckle. "You've been drinkin' enough of it, sellin' it outside yer house."

Gorrin smiled. "And I plan to sell more."

The conversation ended when Gorrin raised his pickaxe again, swinging hard into the stone wall.

CRACK.

A shiny glint caught his eye.

He frowned, digging his fingers into the crack he had just made. There—small nuggets of silver. Not a vein, just scattered pieces. But enough. He quickly looked around. No one watching. With a swift motion, he pocketed the nuggets, hiding them inside his belt pouch. His heart thudded once in his chest.

"It ain't stealing if the mountain gives it to me."

After work, Gorrin made his way through Dumgral'dur's lower districts, passing vendors selling tools, smiths hammering iron, and merchants hawking wares.

He stopped at a small, well-kept goldsmith shop, the air inside thick with the scent of melted metal and coal smoke.

Behind the counter stood a thin, sharp-eyed dwarf with gold-rimmed spectacles perched on his nose.

The goldsmith glanced up as Gorrin entered. "Aye? What can I do for ye?"

Gorrin reached into his pouch, placing the small silver nuggets onto the counter.

The goldsmith’s eyebrows raised slightly.

"Decent pieces," he muttered, picking one up, rolling it between his fingers. "Not the best quality, but still worth somethin’."

He eyed Gorrin curiously. "You don’t work the mines, do you?"

Gorrin kept his face steady.

"Nah," he lied smoothly. "Was paid for furs I sell."

The goldsmith gave a slight smile, but didn’t question further.

"Ten silver for the lot," he said.

Gorrin nodded. "Fair deal."

He took the coins, tucking them into his belt pouch, and left without another word.

The next morning, Gorrin loaded up his cart and set off for Stonebrook once more.

The sun was bright, the road quiet, and by midday, he rolled into the village square, greeted by familiar faces.

Bolin and Harvin met him outside the tavern, arms crossed.

"Back so soon?" Bolin grinned.

"Didn’t think city life suited you that much," Harvin added, smiling.

Gorrin chuckled, hopping down from his cart. "It suits me just fine. But I came for more than ale this time."

Bolin raised a curious brow. "Oh?"

Gorrin slapped his hand against the cart. "Aye. I want three more barrels of ale, and I’m buyin’ some furs. Mink, boar, wolf."

Harvin whistled. "You goin’ into trade now?"

Gorrin smiled. "Somethin’ like that."

Harvin scratched his chin. "Well, good coin's good coin. We got plenty of pelts, and you already know the ale's the best. Five silver for the lot."

Gorrin counted out the silver, stacking the barrels and pelts onto his cart.

Bolin patted his shoulder. "You know, Gorrin, you keep this up, and you'll be richer than all of us."

Gorrin chuckled. "That's the plan."

Back in Dumgral'dur, Gorrin set up his stand in front of his house once more. One barrel of Stonebrook ale, freshly tapped. Mink, boar, and wolf pelts, neatly stacked.

He carved a rough wooden sign:

"ALE – 10 COPPERS A MUG
FURS FOR SALE – ASK FOR PRICE"

As soon as the first few miners passed by, they noticed the setup.

One miner grinned. "You got furs now too, Gorrin? You tryin' to take over the city market?"

Gorrin leaned against the barrel, smiling. "Nah, just makin' sure folks get what they need."

Before long, the mugs were flowing, coins were dropping, and his furs started selling. By nightfall, he had emptied another barrel of ale and sold a few pelts. He counted his earnings. Another 5 silver from ale. 4 silver from furs. 9 silver in one day. But he had some expenses, 5 went for the lot.

Gorrin sat on a low wooden stool, sharpening the edge of his knife, his mind working through his next step.

Selling ale and furs outside his home was fine, but he needed more coin.

"More customers, more buyers… the market district."

The main city market was always bustling, filled with merchants, traders, and shoppers from all over Dumgral'dur. If he could set up his stand there, he'd be able to sell more, faster.

He made up his mind.

The next morning, he loaded his cart with barrels of ale and fresh furs and wheeled it into the market district.

The first day was slow, but soon enough, more people noticed his goods. Miners, smiths, and laborers stopped by for a mug of strong ale. Traders and merchants eyed his furs, haggling for a fair price. Word spread that the Stonebrook ale was strong and worth every copper. Day by day, his coin purse grew heavier.

His week was spent working in the mines, traveling to Stonebrook for supplies, and selling at the market.

After a month of hard work, he had saved 35 silver. A small fortune for a dwarf in the slums. But still not enough.

A Honest Way

That night, Gorrin walked home from the market, his pouch heavier than usual. The slums were quiet, dark, and empty, save for the occasional glow of lanterns behind shuttered windows. He turned into a narrow alley, taking a shortcut toward his home.

Then, a figure stepped into his path.

A dwarf—lean, with a greasy beard, sharp eyes, and a knife on his belt.

"Well, well," the dwarf sneered, blocking the alley exit. "Ain't often we see a merchant walkin' these streets with a full coin purse."

Gorrin stopped, adjusting his stance. "Get outta my way."

The dwarf grinned, shaking his head. "Oh, now where's the fun in that? See, I've had a bad week. Need some silver to make it better."

Gorrin crossed his arms. "Aye? Try earnin' it."

The thief snorted. "Earnin' is for fools. I prefer takin'."

Gorrin stepped forward, voice low. "You ain't takin' nothin' from me."

The thief's expression darkened. "You think you're tough, eh? Walkin' round the market, sellin' your little barrels of piss? I bet you ain't so tough without your cart and your coin."

Gorrin felt his blood heat.

"You should walk away," he said coldly. "Before you do somethin' stupid."

The thief laughed. "Oh, I'll walk away. With your coin."

He lunged forward, trying to grab Gorrin's belt pouch.

Gorrin moved fast, grabbing the dwarf's wrist with an iron grip.

The thief snarled, reaching for his knife.

Gorrin slammed a fist into his gut, making the thief stumble back, coughing.

"You bastard!" the thief wheezed.

Then he rushed forward again. The two collided, fists flying, elbows crashing against ribs, boots slamming into shins. The thief was quick, but Gorrin was stronger. A knife flashed in the dark. Gorrin twisted, feeling a sharp sting as the blade scraped across his arm.

"*Enough of this.*"

He grabbed the thief's throat, slammed him against the alley wall, and pressed his forearm against his windpipe.

The dwarf gasped, struggling, clawing at Gorrin's arm, kicking wildly. But Gorrin tightened his grip. The thief choked, his face turning red, then purple. His struggles grew weaker. Then —stillness.

Gorrin held the grip for a moment longer, feeling the life drain from the body beneath him. Then, slowly, he let go. The thief's lifeless body slumped to the ground. Breathing heavily, Gorrin wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, his pulse still pounding in his ears.

He bent down, searching the corpse. A belt pouch—15 silver. A rusty knife. A few copper trinkets. *"Fifteen silver… more than a month's wages in the mines."*

Gorrin exhaled, then dragged the body behind a loose wooden plank, concealing it in the shadows. No one had seen. No one would care.The slums swallowed the dead without question.

Back at his home, Gorrin sat at his wooden table, turning the silver coins in his fingers. His mind was racing. *"Fifteen silver… just like that. One night. One thief."*

He had spent weeks in the mines, sweating, bleeding, breaking his back for less coin than this.

He had spent months selling ale and furs, making his silver slowly, carefully.

"And this bastard had fifteen silver just sittin' in his pocket."

His thoughts turned darker.

"How much coin do the thieves in this city have? How much do they take? How much do they hoard?"

He had no desire to become a thief himself.

But...

"What if I take from the bastards who already steal?"

"What if I take what they don't deserve?"

The thought sat heavy in his mind. He knew it was wrong. But so was breaking his back for scraps while others lived off stolen coin. Gorrin gritted his teeth. He wasn't a thief.

But he had no problem taking from one. His fingers closed around the silver. Maybe it was time the city's thieves learned what it was like to be robbed.

Gorrin spent his free days differently now.

Instead of simply tending his stall or drinking at the Black Anvil Tavern, he walked the market district, the slums, and the back alleys of Dumgral'dur—watching.

He wasn't looking for merchants or traders.

He was looking for thieves.

The city had plenty of them. They moved in the shadows, skulked through the streets, their eyes always on an easy mark.

Gorrin knew where to look— Busy marketplaces where pickpockets worked their trade. Dark alleys where muggers preyed on the weak. Crowded taverns where cutpurses waited for drunk fools.

One afternoon, standing near a spice vendor's stall, he saw his first target.

A slender, hooded dwarf brushed past a wealthy merchant, his hand quick as a snake. In a blink, the merchant's coin purse was gone, and the thief slipped away into the alleyway.

Gorrin grinned.

"Got you, bastard."

He moved fast, weaving through the crowd, following the thief into the narrow backstreets.

The thief was casual, checking the pouch in his hand, clearly pleased with himself.

That's when Gorrin struck.

He grabbed the thief's collar, yanking him backward.

"Oi—what the fu—"

The thief barely had time to react before Gorrin slammed a fist into his stomach.

The dwarf gasped, doubling over.

"Thought you could just take from folk and walk away?" Gorrin growled.

The thief gritted his teeth, reached for a knife— But Gorrin was faster. A quick uppercut to the jaw sent the thief sprawling onto the stone floor.

He groaned, rolling onto his side, but Gorrin was already on him. He dug through the thief's pockets, pulling out a handful of coins. 10 silver.

"Well, look at that," Gorrin muttered, tucking the coins into his own pouch.

He left the thief groaning on the ground, walking away as if nothing had happened.

After that, it became routine. Gorrin watched, waited, and followed.

Every few days, he caught another thief in the act, dragged them into the alleys, and beat the coin out of them. One had 8 silver. Another had 12 silver and a gold ring. One fool even had 15 silver and a handful of copper.

His pouch grew heavier with each passing week.

And with each beating, he felt less guilty.

"They take from others. I take from them. Ain't no crime in that."

But soon, he wanted more than just their coin.

He wanted to know where they stashed it.

One night, after catching a particularly nervous-looking thief, Gorrin decided to get some real answers.

The thief—a skinny, dirty-faced dwarf with missing teeth—struggled as Gorrin pinned him against a wall.

"Where's your hideout?" Gorrin growled.

The thief spat blood, glaring. "Screw you, bastard."

Gorrin punched him again, sending him crashing into the dirt.

"Where. Is. It."

The thief groaned, clutching his ribs.

"I don't know what you're—"

Gorrin kicked him hard in the stomach.

The dwarf let out a strangled cough, curling up on the ground.

After a few moments, he wheezed, "Alright… alright!"

Gorrin grabbed his collar, yanking him up. "Talk."

The thief winced. "Small place. Back in the slums. Near the old forge. Rotten wooden door. We keep our stash there."

Gorrin smiled. "That wasn't so hard, was it?"

The thief didn't answer.

Gorrin hauled him to his feet, dragged him through the streets, and when they arrived at the small wooden shack, he kicked open the door.

The shack was filthy, a small bed, a broken chair, and the stink of old ale filling the air.

Gorrin searched quickly, knocking over a pile of dirty rags, looking under loose floorboards. Then—a hollow thump. He felt the wood beneath his boot shift slightly. *"A trap door."*

He ripped it open, revealing a wooden box inside.

Inside, he found a silver dagger, finely crafted. 35 silver coins. 50 copper pieces. A small silver nugget. *"Well, well."*

He pocketed the silver and the dagger, turning back to the thief. The dwarf coughed, trying to pull himself up. "You shouldn't have told me," Gorrin said flatly.

Then he slammed his boot into the thief's head, knocking him unconscious.

Without another word, he left the shack, stepping back into the dark streets, disappearing into the city night.

Back at his home, Gorrin sat at his table, laying out the silver coins, the dagger, and the nugget. He leaned back, exhaling slowly. *"This city bleeds silver… and I've barely started cuttin'."*

He wasn't a thief. He wasn't like them. But he was taking what they stole. And in Dumgral'dur, the only way to rise was through coin.

With the coin he had gathered, Gorrin finally had enough to move his trade into a proper space.

A small stone-and-wood shop in the market district, nothing fancy—just a single room with a counter, some shelves, and space to store his goods.

The rent was 2 silver a week, which cut into his earnings, but he figured the extra customers would more than make up for it.

Now, his week was split between three jobs. Three days in the shop, selling Stonebrook ale, furs, fish, tools, and vegetables. Four days in the mines, still hauling ore and hacking stone. One day to drive to Stonebrook, stocking up on fresh goods.

Slowly, his silver piled up. In a good week, he now made 20 silver.

Once a week, Gorrin took his wagon and horse, setting out for Stonebrook at dawn.

The road was familiar, winding through open fields and thick forests, the air fresh, crisp, untouched by city filth.

Arriving in the village square, he was greeted by Harvin and Bolin, who were already waiting outside the tavern.

"Back again, eh?" Harvin smiled. "We ought to start callin' this the Gorrin Trade Route."

Gorrin chuckled, hopping down from the cart. "If I keep makin' good coin, might as well."

Together, they loaded the wagon with three barrels of strong Stonebrook ale. Furs and pelts—boar, mink, wolf, fox. Simple tools—hammers, chisels, knives, saws. Fresh fish from the river. Vegetables from the village fields—onions, carrots, potatoes

"That'll be 10 silver," Bolin said, rubbing his hands together.

Gorrin counted out the coin, tossing it to them.

"Pleasure doin' trade," he said with a smile, climbing back onto his cart.

Harvin grinned. "See you next week, merchant dwarf!"

Gorrin flicked the reins, setting off back to Dumgral'dur, his cart full of goods, his coin purse lighter—but his trade growing.

By midday, Gorrin was back in Dumgral'dur's bustling market district, unloading his cart in front of his shop.

The wooden sign above the door read:

"Gorrin's Wares – Ale, Furs, Tools & More!"

He spent the morning stacking barrels, laying furs neatly over the counter, and setting baskets of vegetables near the front.

Once everything was in place, he opened the shop doors and waited for the first customers to arrive.

Soon enough, they did. A miner walked in, slapping 10 coppers on the counter. "A mug of ale, Gorrin! I need somethin' strong before I go home to the missus."

A blacksmith came by, eyeing the pelts. "Good quality wolf fur. How much?"

"7 silver for a full pelt," Gorrin replied. The blacksmith grumbled but handed over the coin.

A merchant's wife looked through the vegetables, sniffing the onions. "These from Stonebrook?" "Aye, best in the land." She bought a basketful for 2 silver.

The hours passed quickly, the shop never truly empty. By the end of the first day, Gorrin counted out his earnings. 6 silver from ale. 9 silver from furs. 5 silver from tools and food. 20 silver.

He leaned back in his wooden chair, smiling.

"I made more in one day than a whole week in the mines."

Maybe… Maybe someday he wouldn't need the mines at all.

The morning was like any other—Gorrin was setting up his wares in the shop, arranging furs, barrels of ale, and fresh vegetables when a sharp knock rattled his door.

He turned to see a well-dressed dwarf in a dark green cloak, a Guild sigil pinned to his chest. His beard was finely groomed, his expression stern and professional.

Behind him stood two other dwarves, one scribbling on a ledger, the other cross-armed and watching everything carefully.

"Merchant Gorrin?" the lead dwarf asked, stepping inside.

"Aye," Gorrin said, setting down a pelt. "And who's askin'?"

The dwarf offered a scroll, the wax seal bearing the mark of the Dumgral'dur Trader's Guild.

"I am Inspector Dain Goldscale," he announced. "I've come on official guild trade. There have been reports of dishonest traders using rigged scales and selling counterfeit furs. The Guild is investigating—and we require your cooperation."

Gorrin grunted, crossing his arms. "So I'm bein' accused of fraud?"

Dain shook his head. "No, not yet. But someone in the market is, and we need help figuring out who."

Gorrin agreed to help, knowing full well that if the Trader's Guild trusted him, his reputation in Dumgral'dur's market would only grow.

His first task? Find out if local hunters and trappers were actually selling genuine furs—or if someone in the city was lying.

Since he already trusted the furs from Stonebrook, he hitched his cart and rode out to two other villages near Dumgral'dur, known for their trapping and hunting.

The first stop was Iron Hollow, a small mountain village known for its boar and fox pelts.

Gorrin found the local trapper's lodge, where a few dwarves were skinning freshly caught game.

A grizzled old trapper with a scar down his cheek wiped his hands on his apron as Gorrin approached.

"What brings ya out here, merchant?" the trapper grunted.

"Traders in Dumgral'dur are sellin' fake furs," Gorrin said, arms crossed. "Guild's lookin' into it. Just makin' sure your lot's sellin' the real thing."

The old trapper scoffed, grabbing a freshly skinned fox pelt and tossing it toward Gorrin.

"Feel that. That's Iron Hollow fur. Finest fox and boar pelts you'll find. If someone's mixin' in ratty furs, it ain't us."

Gorrin ran his fingers over the fur. Thick, soft—real.

"Alright," Gorrin nodded. "Then someone's sellin' dog hair and passin' it off as wolf."

The trapper gritted his teeth. "Bastards. Should be strung up for that."

Gorrin smiled. "I'll handle it."

After checking a few more pelts, he loaded back into his cart and set off for the next village—Timberstead.

Timberstead was deep in the woodlands, where hunters specialized in mink, otter, and wolf pelts.

Gorrin arrived at a hunter's outpost, where a group of rugged dwarves were hanging fresh pelts on drying racks.

A younger trapper, arms covered in cuts from skinning, greeted him.

"New customer?" the dwarf asked.

"Not today," Gorrin said. "Just got a question. You send any of your furs to Dumgral'dur?"

The trapper nodded. "Aye, we send 'em by caravan every two weeks. Always the best quality."

"You sure about that?" Gorrin challenged, watching the dwarf's reaction. "No one here mixin' in cheap scraps?"

The trapper frowned. "You insultin' our trade?"

Gorrin chuckled. "No, I'm insultin' someone else's."

An older hunter nearby overheard and stepped forward.

"If someone's mixin' in mutt fur with our pelts, it ain't comin' from us," the elder hunter growled. "We've been skinnin' beasts since before you had a beard, lad. Mink, wolf, and otter—proper skins."

Gorrin inspected several furs himself.

Like Iron Hollow, they were the real deal.

Which meant only one thing—some bastard in Dumgral'dur was lying.

With that, he hopped onto his cart and rode back to the city, ready to expose whoever was behind the scam.

Back in Dumgral'dur, Gorrin began inspecting the competition.

He started with a rival fur trader, a grumpy dwarf named Orin Bronzebuckle.

"Buying or wasting my time?" Orin grumbled as Gorrin examined his goods.

Gorrin picked up a fox pelt, ran his fingers over it, then frowned.

"Feels too rough… fur's patchy in spots."

Then he noticed something else—a scale sitting near the counter.

Gorrin tossed a silver coin onto it. The weight shifted unnaturally.

"Rigged."

He set his own coin scale beside it and dropped the same coin.

The weight was different.

Gorrin raised an eyebrow. "You don't mind me usin' my own scale, do you?"

Orin shifted uneasily. "Ain't necessary."

Gorrin grinned. "Oh, I think it is."

He measured a pelt's weight on Orin's scale—it claimed to be twice as heavy as it actually was.

"Cheatin' bastard," Gorrin muttered. Gorrin went back to the Guild and reported the finds.

Soon Dain Goldscale and the Guild officers stepped inside Orin shop.

"Orin Bronzebuckle," Dain announced. "The Guild hereby fines you for using a rigged scale. Consider your trade license under review."

Orin turned pale. "You can't—!"

Dain unrolled a scroll. "According to Guild law, fraudulent trade is punishable by a fine of 25 silver. Pay, or lose your shop."

Orin scowled, slamming his fists on the table, but he had no choice.

Gorrin watched with satisfaction as the corrupt trader was forced to pay up.

Gorrin wasn’t done.

There was still the matter of fake furs.

He paid a visit to another suspicious merchant, a dwarf named Thalgrim Stonetusk, whose furs looked unnaturally clean and stiff.

Gorrin picked up a wolf pelt—and frowned.

"This ain't wolf," he muttered. "It’s dyed dog fur."

Thalgrim froze. "That’s ridiculous—"

Gorrin grabbed a knife, scraped the fur’s surface, and saw the cheap dye flake off.

He looked up, grinning. "So, you just sellin’ dogs now? Or you got somethin’ else to say?"

Thalgrim stammered, but before he could lie further, Dain and his officers arrived.

"The Guild fines you for selling counterfeit furs, Thalgrim. That’ll be 30 silver."

Thalgrim’s face turned red, but he could only nod, reluctantly paying the fine.

By the end of the week, the Guild had issued heavy fines to two corrupt traders.

Dain Goldscale approached Gorrin, nodding in approval.

"You’ve done good work," he admitted. "Honest traders are hard to find these days. The Guild will remember your name."

Gorrin grinned, shaking his hand. "That’s all I ask."

From that day forward, his reputation as a fair trader in Dumgral’dur only grew.

Gorrin stormed through the market, his boots pounding against the stone roads, his jaw set like iron.

He had ridden across two villages, inspected real furs, and confirmed that the counterfeit pelts weren’t coming from the hunters.

That meant one thing—someone in Dumgral’dur was butchering dogs and passing off their fur as mink, wolf, and fox.

And Gorrin had a pretty good idea who knew more than he was letting on.

Gorrin shoved open the door of Thalgrim Stonetusk’s shop, the scent of cheap leather and musty furs filling the air.

Thalgrim was weighing a bundle of pelts, but when he saw Gorrin stride toward him, his face paled.

"You again?" Thalgrim sneered, though there was a nervous twitch in his fingers.

Gorrin didn’t slow down. He grabbed Thalgrim by the collar, slamming him against the wooden counter.

"Who’s makin’ the fake furs?" Gorrin growled, his voice low and dangerous.

Thalgrim sputtered, pushing weakly at Gorrin’s grip. "What the hell are you talkin’ about?!"

Gorrin hauled him forward, then shoved him back again, knocking a few stacks of poorly treated pelts onto the floor.

"You sell dog fur," Gorrin spat. "Someone in this city’s runnin’ an underground pelt shop, and I know you ain’t skinnin’ ‘em yourself."

Thalgrim gritted his teeth. "I don’t know nothin’."

SLAP.

Gorrin backhanded him across the face, sending a few drops of spit flying.

"Try again," he growled.

Thalgrim gasped, rubbing his cheek, glaring. "You can’t just—"

SMACK.

Another blow—this time, to the gut.

Thalgrim coughed, bending over, but Gorrin grabbed him again, forcing him upright.

"Who’s makin’ the fake furs?" Gorrin repeated.

Thalgrim spat a bit of blood onto the counter, but this time, his defiance wavered.

"Alright! Alright!" he gasped, panting heavily.

Gorrin tightened his grip. "Talk."

Thalgrim shook his head, defeated.

"There’s… there’s a shop," he admitted. "Deep in the underground slums. Near the old quarry. They slaughter stray dogs, tan the hides, and sell ‘em as real pelts."

Gorrin felt his stomach turn.

These bastards weren’t just cheating customers—they were butchering animals just to make a quick silver.

"Who runs it?"

Thalgrim hesitated.

Gorrin raised a fist again.

Thalgrim flinched. "A dwarf named Dulgar Rottbeard. He’s the one you want."

Gorrin shoved him back, adjusting his tunic.

"That wasn’t so hard, was it?" he muttered before turning on his heel and marching straight to the Traders’ Guild.

The Guildhall was busy as ever when Gorrin entered, but Dain Goldscale was already expecting him.

The inspector sat behind his massive oak desk, ledger open, quill ready.

"Well?" Dain asked, looking up.

Gorrin slammed his hands onto the desk.

"There’s an illegal tannery in the underground slums, near the old quarry. A bastard named Dulgar Rottbeard is running it—butchering stray dogs, treating their pelts, and sellin’ ‘em as mink, wolf, and fox."

Dain’s expression darkened.

"You’re sure?"

Gorrin crossed his arms. "Aye. And I got the name straight from one of the bastards buyin’ from ‘em."

Dain nodded slowly, then pulled out a heavy pouch from his desk.

"For your information," he said, tossing it onto the table.

Gorrin grabbed the pouch and felt the weight. 20 silver.

He smiled. "Pleasure doin’ trade."

Dain stood. "We raid the shop at first light. You want to watch?"

Gorrin grinned. "Damn right I do."

At dawn, a team of Traders’ Guild enforcers—along with a few city guards—made their way to the underground slums of Dumgral’dur.

Gorrin stood near the back, arms crossed, watching as Dain Goldscale led the charge.

The shop was exactly where Thalgrim said it would be—a low stone building, barely more than a shack, with a horrid stench wafting from within.

Dain raised a hand, signaling the enforcers.

Then—he kicked the door open.

Inside, the stench was unbearable.

Wooden racks lined the room, covered in drying pelts—but not the fine mink, fox, or wolf that honest traders sold.

These were coarse, stiff, sickly-looking skins.

A huge boiling vat of dye bubbled in the corner, filling the air with the reek of chemicals.

And standing over a freshly skinned carcass was Dulgar Rottbeard, his knife still in his hand.

The moment he saw the Guild enforcers, his face went pale.

"You're under Guild arrest," Dain announced, stepping forward. "Your trade is finished."

Dulgar dropped the knife, trying to run, but three enforcers tackled him to the ground, shackling his wrists.

The other workers tried to flee, but they were easily caught.

Gorrin watched as the Guild officers tore down the racks, confiscated the counterfeit furs, and poured the disgusting dye vats onto the dirt.

By the time they finished, the shop was destroyed.

Dulgar Rottbeard and his men were dragged away, facing heavy Guild fines, imprisonment, and exile.

Back at the Guildhall, Dain Goldscale gave Gorrin a firm nod.

"You did good work, Gorrin," he admitted. "Because of you, the city's rid of another group of cheats."

Gorrin grinned, tossing the pouch of 20 silver in his hand.

"Just glad to be on the right side of the trade."

Dain smiled. "Keep it up, and you won't just be a merchant—you'll be one of the most trusted names in the market."

Gorrin chuckled.

"One step at a time."

One evening, as Gorrin closed up his shop, he noticed a group of merchants gathered in hushed conversation near the market square.

Grumbling. Anger. Fear.

Something was wrong.

He approached the crowd, recognizing several fellow shopkeepers, including Orik Hammerbrew, a blacksmith, Milda Copperveil, a cloth trader, and Jorvin Stoutfoot, a spice merchant.

"Alright," Gorrin grunted, crossing his arms. "What's got everyone's beard in a twist?"

Orik, the burly blacksmith, spat into the dirt. "The damn tax collector."

Milda huffed, adjusting her shawl. "They're doubling shop fees in the market! If we don't pay, we lose our stalls."

Gorrin's brow furrowed. "Doubling? That's madness. Why?"

Jorvin sighed heavily. "The Duke's treasurers claim the city needs more coin for road repairs and patrols. But we all know the real reason—they're bleeding us dry."

The merchants muttered in agreement.

Some traders had already begun scheming, some suggested bribing officials. Others wanted to petition the Duke directly. A few were considering smuggling goods to avoid taxation altogether.

Gorrin scratched his beard, his mind working.

"If I pay double tax, my profits get gutted. I just got this shop up and runnin'—no way I'm lettin' it sink to some paper-pushin' bastard."

"Alright," Gorrin finally said. "We ain't just gonna roll over. Let's figure out a way to beat these bastards—fairly or otherwise."

The next morning, Gorrin marched to the Tax Office, a massive stone hall filled with scrolls, quills, and dwarves grumbling over ledgers.

Behind a high desk, a wiry, bespectacled dwarf named Stevin Ledgerhand sat, scratching at parchment with an ink-stained hand.

"Ah, Master Gorrin," Stevin greeted dryly, barely looking up. "Here about your new market dues?"

Gorrin leaned forward, planting both hands on the desk.

"Aye. And I want to know if there's a way around 'em."

Stevin sighed, rubbing his temple. "There are no exceptions, Master Gorrin. All traders must comply."

"But what about… special permits?" Gorrin asked, narrowing his eyes.

Stevin paused. "Well… There are permits for official city suppliers, those who provide 'essential goods.' But they're rare."

Gorrin smiled. "And who decides what's essential?"

Stevin shrugged. "The tax officers, of course."

Later that day, Gorrin tracked down Belfram Coinpurse, the city's head tax officer.

Belfram was a wealthy-looking dwarf, with gold-trimmed robes and a thick silver chain around his neck.

Gorrin approached him at a private alehouse, sliding into the chair across from him.

"You're a busy man," Gorrin said, ordering two mugs of ale.

Belfram raised a brow. "And you're a desperate one."

Gorrin chuckled. "I prefer to think of myself as a merchant with an opportunity."

Belfram smiled, sipping his ale. "I assume you're here to talk taxes."

"Aye. Let's make a deal."

Belfram laughed. "Oh? And what can you offer that I'd be interested in?"

Gorrin leaned forward, his tone low.

"I sell some of the best furs in the market, straight from Stonebrook and Iron Hollow." He took a sip of his ale. "I hear your wife likes fine things."

Belfram stroked his beard. "Go on."

"I'll offer you first pick at reduced prices. And… I'll throw in a barrel of Stonebrook's finest ale."

Belfram's eyes twinkled at that.

"My wife has been asking for a new fox pelt," he mused.

"Then you'd be a fool not to take this deal," Gorrin said smoothly.

Belfram chuckled. "And in return?"

"You mark me as a ‘supplier of essential goods’ and exempt my shop from the doubled tax."

Belfram tapped his fingers against the table, thinking.

Then, finally, he extended his hand.

"Done."

Gorrin shook his hand, sealing the deal.

A few days later, the tax decree was enforced across the market. Many traders grumbled, some struggled, some bribed officials. But Gorrin’s shop remained untouched.

When the other merchants found out, they were stunned. "How the hell did you manage that?" Orik Hammerbrew asked, crossing his arms.

Gorrin grinned, leaning back in his chair. "Good trade."

Milda Copperveil shook her head. "Whatever you did, it worked. The rest of us are sufferin’."

Gorrin raised his mug. "Then maybe next time, you let me handle the negotiations."

From that day forward, Gorrin wasn’t just another trader.

Gorrin leaned against his shop counter, arms crossed, brow furrowed.

Something wasn’t right.

The past few days, his usual customers had been scarce. Even the regular miners and blacksmiths—those who could never resist a strong mug of Stonebrook ale— were avoiding his stand.

He overheard whispers in the marketplace. “Gorrin’s ale? You ain’t heard? They say it’s cursed.”, “Folk have been gettin’ sick, stomach pains, sweatin’, the whole lot.”, “Better off buyin’ from the elven vintner down the way.”

Gorrin’s hands clenched into fists.

"Cursed barrels? That’s a load of troll dung."

His ale was from Stonebrook, the best brew around. If people were gettin’ sick, something wasn’t right. And he aimed to find out why. He hitched his cart and set off to Stonebrook, riding hard through the dirt roads and forest paths.

As he arrived, he went straight to the tavern, where Bolin and Harvin were already drinking.

"Oi, Gorrin!" Harvin greeted. "Come to stock up?"

"No," Gorrin said darkly, slamming his tankard on the table. "I came to ask why folk in Dumgral’dur think your ale’s cursed."

Bolin choked on his drink. "What?"

Harvin’s brows knitted together. "Ain’t possible. We’ve been brewin’ the same way for years. No one’s complainin’ here."

Gorrin grunted. "Then it means someone’s messin’ with my supply."

He stomped into the storeroom, checking the barrels.

Each one was sealed tight, fresh, and full of the same strong ale he had been selling for months.

"Nothing wrong here."

Then he checked the shipment records—no reports of spoiled grain, bad water, or rot.

Stonebrook’s brew was as fine as ever. That meant the problem was happening in Dumgral’dur.

Back in his shop cellar, Gorrin checked the latest barrels that had arrived a week ago. They looked normal—sealed, heavy, the scent of rich, deep ale still fresh. But then he spotted something odd. A few of the barrels had slight discoloration near the seams.

"That ain’t normal."

He grabbed a knife, pried open the lid, and dipped his finger inside.

The ale smelled fine, but there was a strange bitterness at the end. Not spoiled… but altered. Someone had tampered with his supply.

Gorrin had heard that an elven vintner, Lirion Farvale, had recently set up a stall in Dumgral’dur’s market.

And now, conveniently, his sales had risen right as Gorrin’s had dropped.

Coincidence? Gorrin doubted it. He tightened his belt, grabbed his hammer, and set out to pay Lirion a visit.

The market district was bustling as always, but Gorrin’s eyes were locked onto one particular stall.

Lirion Farvale’s wine and ale stand sat near the center of the marketplace, its display polished and elegant—too polished.

The elf himself stood behind the counter, tall and lean, with neatly braided golden hair and a smug expression.

A group of customers stood nearby, sipping from delicate glass cups, murmuring in approval.

Gorrin stomped forward, knocking his fist against the wooden counter.

Lirion raised a delicate brow. "Ah, Master Gorrin. To what do I owe the pleasure?"

Gorrin crossed his arms. "Word is my ale is cursed."

Lirion's lips curled slightly. "Unfortunate, isn't it? A shame, truly. The people of Dumgral'dur deserve only the finest beverages."

Gorrin's fist tightened. "That's funny. My ale's been fine for months, and suddenly, it's making folk sick? Right as your trade starts booming?"

Lirion chuckled softly. "Are you suggesting I had something to do with this? Preposterous."

Gorrin leaned in, voice low.

"Aye? Then tell me why some of my barrels were tampered with."

For the first time, Lirion's expression flickered. Just for a second.

Then he sighed, shaking his head dramatically. "Dwarves. Always so quick to throw blame."

Gorrin's eyes narrowed. "Either you're guilty as sin, or someone's setting us both up."

Lirion's smile faltered. "What are you saying?"

Gorrin tapped his fingers on the counter. "Think about it. If I lose customers, they come to you. But if I find out your ale is next to be 'cursed'? Who benefits?"

Lirion's face paled.

Someone was playing them both.

That night, Gorrin and Lirion set a trap. Gorrin stacked fresh barrels behind his shop, leaving them unguarded. Lirion placed his own casks nearby, pretending to leave them unattended.

Then they waited.

Hours passed, and just when Gorrin thought it was for nothing, he saw a figure moving in the shadows.

A cloaked dwarf—hood pulled low, hands moving fast—prying open a barrel and pouring something inside.

Gorrin lunged.

"OI! STOP RIGHT THERE!"

The saboteur turned to flee, but Gorrin was faster. He grabbed the dwarf's cloak, yanked him back, and threw him to the ground.

Lirion stepped forward, face grim. "Who sent you?"

The dwarf groaned, struggling. "Go rot, both of you!"

Gorrin grabbed him by the collar. "Oh, you'll talk, or we'll let the Trader's Guild decide what to do with ya."

The dwarf spat on the ground. "It was Orin Bronzebuckle. He wanted you both ruined so he could sell his own watered-down swill and perhaps some old grudge!"

Gorrin and Lirion exchanged glances.

Gorrin grinned. "Well now… we've got a score to settle."

Gorrin's pickaxe slammed into the stone, the rhythmic clang, clang, clang echoing through the tunnels of Dumgral'dur's deep mines.

He was back to the daily grind, hammering away at the rock face, hauling carts of ore, reinforcing tunnels with thick wooden beams.

The work was hard, sweaty, and relentless—but he didn't mind it. His arms were strong, his back unbending, and with each swing, he felt the mountain yield to his will.

Then—something caught his eye.

A glimmer.

"Again?"

His breath slowed.

He stepped closer, wiping away dust and fragments.

Silver.

And not just flecks this time—seven big nuggets, each one thick and heavy.

His heart pounded in his chest.

"This is more than just luck now… this is the mountain smilin' on me."

He glanced around. No one watching.

Quickly, he pocketed the nuggets, careful not to make a sound.

"This haul… this is different. This is real coin."

For the rest of the shift, he barely noticed the ache in his arms or the sweat running down his back.

All he could think about was how much this silver was worth.

And what it could get him.

That evening, Gorrin made his way back to the same goldsmith's shop—the one where he had quietly sold his first stolen nuggets.

The goldsmith, the sharp-eyed dwarf with gold-rimmed spectacles, looked up as Gorrin entered.

"Ah. Back again, are we?"

Gorrin stepped up to the counter, dropping a cloth bundle onto it.

The goldsmith unwrapped it, revealing the seven gleaming silver nuggets.

His eyebrows raised.

"This," he murmured, picking one up, weighing it in his palm, "is quite the find. And I assume you're still not working the mines?"

Gorrin kept his face blank. "Like I said before, I trade furs."

The goldsmith chuckled, but he didn't press further.

"Alright," he said, tallying up the weight and purity. "This is a fine batch. I'll pay you 350 silver."

Gorrin's stomach tightened.

350 silver.

That was more than he had ever held at once.

He kept his face calm, but inside, his thoughts were racing.

"With this, I can do more than just survive. I can start thinkin' about movin' up."

The goldsmith counted out the coins, stacking them neatly.

Gorrin scooped them into his pouch, feeling the weight pull on his belt.

"This ain't just coin anymore. This is power."

He nodded to the goldsmith. "Pleasure doin' trade."

And with that, he stepped out into the night air, his mind buzzing with new possibilities.

For the first time in a long while, Gorrin didn't go back to his cramped home in the slums.

He went to The Black Swan, a better-class tavern, where merchants, tradesmen, and wealthier dwarves gathered.

As he stepped inside, he felt the difference immediately.

The air smelled of roasted meats, pipe smoke, and fine spirits. The floor was clean, the furniture polished, the clientele well-dressed.

No muddy miners, no shady gamblers—just folk who had coin.

He liked it.

He strode up to the bar, dropping a silver coin onto the counter.

"Ale. A good one," he said. "And a steak. The best you got."

The barkeep, a burly dwarf with a thick beard, raised an eyebrow. "Feelin' fancy today?"

Gorrin grinned. "Aye. Thought I'd treat myself."

The barkeep chuckled, pouring a deep amber ale into a fine iron mug.

The steak arrived soon after, seared to perfection, glistening with juices, a thick slice of bread beside it.

Gorrin took his first bite—and for the first time in years, he ate like a dwarf who had coin.

"Maybe I ought to get used to this."

After his meal, Gorrin walked through the market streets, his coin pouch still heavy.

For too long, he had either been covered in mining dust or wearing the same worn-out trousers, suspenders, and tacky old shirt.

But now?

He had coin to change that.

He stepped into a clothier's shop, where fine garments lined the walls.

The shopkeeper, an older dwarven woman with sharp eyes, looked him over.

"You look like a man who needs an upgrade," she said dryly.

Gorrin chuckled. "Aye. Somethin' a little finer than mine dust and ale stains."

She nodded, pulling out a set of clothes. A well-fitted linen shirt, light and comfortable. A dark vest, giving him a sharper, more polished look. Linen trousers, tailored to his size.

Gorrin examined himself in the mirror.

"Damn. I almost look respectable."

For the first time, he didn’t look like just another slum miner.

He looked like a merchant.

He paid the woman, slipped into his new clothes, and stepped back out into the streets of Dumgral’dur.

And as he walked back toward his shop and home, he wasn’t just thinking about tomorrow.

He was thinking about his future.

"If I keep this up… I won’t be livin’ in the slums for much longer."

The night was quiet as Gorrin stepped into his small home in the slums.

But tonight, he wasn’t just resting. He had work to do.

With his pockets heavy with silver, he knew he couldn’t leave it in plain sight. The slums were crawling with thieves, and while he could fight off most trouble, he wasn’t about to take any chances.

So, he set to work.

He moved his furniture aside, then grabbed a chisel and hammer, prying up one of the wooden floorboards.

Beneath the floor was solid stone, but Gorrin had a plan.

He chipped away at the softer stone, slowly carving out a small hidden compartment. It took a couple of hours, but eventually, he had a deep enough space to stash his valuables.

He grabbed his coin pouch, emptying the 350 silver inside. The coins clinked together, a sound that normally filled him with satisfaction.

Next, he placed his silver dagger inside—the one he had taken from the thieves’ stash weeks ago.

Finally, he covered it with a thick wolf pelt, making sure it looked natural.

With a satisfied nod, he placed the wooden plank back in place, securing it carefully so that only he knew how to open it.

"A few more hauls, and I can leave this filth-ridden part of the city behind."

With that thought in mind, he went to sleep, eager for another day of work.

The next morning, Gorrin dragged himself out of bed and back into the dark, choking tunnels of the mines.

The hours were long, the work brutal, his arms ached with every swing of the pickaxe.

But he endured.

Every blow against the rock, every cart he loaded, every tunnel reinforced—he saw it as a step closer to leaving the slums.

Finally, at the end of the shift, he washed the dust from his skin, feeling exhausted but satisfied.

He had survived another day. Another step toward his goal. As he stepped into his home, the thought crossed his mind. *"I will take a bit for daily purchases from the stash."*

He moved , pulling back the wolf pelt, then prying up the floorboard.

He lifted the hidden plank… And his stomach dropped. The stash was empty. Gone.

His silver. His dagger. Everything. His blood ran hot as the realization hit him. *"I've been robbed."*

For a moment, he just stood there, his hands clenched into fists, his breath slow and heavy.

Then, he let out a low growl of rage.

"BASTARDS!"

He slammed his fist against the wall, knocking over a chair in frustration.

"Months of work. All gone in a single night."

His mind raced.

The thieves in the slums had done this. And Gorrin wasn't about to let them get away with it.

That night, Gorrin walked the streets, his eyes scanning every shadow, every alley, every suspicious figure.

He wasn't just looking for any thief. He was looking for answers. After an hour of wandering, he finally spotted a lone figure, slipping into an alley. Gorrin moved fast. The thief barely had time to react before Gorrin grabbed him by the back of the neck and slammed him against a stone wall.

The dwarf grunted in pain, struggling, but Gorrin's grip was iron.

"Where's the thieves' guild?" Gorrin growled.

The thief spat onto the ground. "Sod off, I ain't tellin' you—"

Gorrin punched him hard in the gut. The thief let out a choked gasp, doubling over.

"Try again," Gorrin said, voice dark.

The thief coughed, trembling now. "I— I don’t know, I swear!"

Gorrin slammed him against the wall again.

"Lie to me again, and you’ll be spitting out your own teeth."

The thief whimpered, blood running from his nose.

"Okay! Okay!" he gasped. "There’s a safe house—a small shack near the broken forge. That’s where the guild’s runners meet!"

Gorrin’s eyes narrowed.

"Now we’re gettin’ somewhere."

Back at his home, Gorrin prepared himself. If he was going after the thieves, he wasn’t going empty-handed. He strapped on his leather armor, securing the buckles tightly.He pulled on thick leather boots, ones sturdy enough for rough fights. Then, he grabbed his warhammer, resting it over his shoulder.

"You bastards took from me."

"Now, I take from you."

With a grim determination, Gorrin set out into the night—heading straight for the thieves’ hideout.

Gorrin moved like a shadow through the slums, his warhammer resting on his shoulder, boots crunching lightly on the dirt roads.

The house stood at the edge of the slums, an unassuming, run-down shack with a half-broken door and a sagging roof.

"This is it."

His heart was steady, his breathing slow.

The thieves thought they could steal from him and get away with it. They were wrong.

The room was small—a rickety wooden table, a few shelves filled with stolen trinkets, and chairs scattered about. A ragged old carpet covered most of the stone floor. Gorrin scanned the room, then settled into a dark corner, gripping his hammer.

And he waited. Minutes passed. Then an hour. Then another. But no one came. His jaw tightened. His patience burned out.

With a sudden growl of rage, Gorrin grabbed a chair and hurled it against the wall.

CRASH.

The wood shattered.

He swept his arm across the shelves, sending pots and plates crashing to the ground.

His warhammer slammed against the table, breaking it in half with a deep, thunderous crack.

Then he turned, stomping over the carpet—

His foot slipped.

The rug slid beneath him, and he crashed to the ground with a heavy thud.

"*What in the—*"

As he pushed himself up, he noticed something.

Beneath the carpet was a wooden hatch—a trapdoor.

A slow, wicked grin spread across his face.

"Ahaa… here you hide, you little shits."

Gorrin ripped the trapdoor open and was met with the sight of a wooden ladder leading downward.

The air was stale, thick with the scent of damp earth and unwashed bodies.

He descended quietly, his boots barely making a sound as he stepped onto the stone floor of a long, narrow tunnel.

It led into a larger room, dimly lit by flickering lanterns. And there they were. Five thieves.

One sat at a table, scribbling into a ledger—likely keeping track of their stolen goods. One was asleep on a pile of furs.

Another was sharpening his blade, his dagger scraping against a whetstone, metal hissing softly. The last two lounged nearby, speaking in low murmurs, both armed. Every one of them was a killer. A cutthroat. A bastard who lived off the misery of others.

Gorrin stepped into the light. The thieves turned to him, startled. The one at the table raised an eyebrow. "Well, well. Who the fuck are you?"

Gorrin’s voice was calm, but cold. "Someone in this room robbed me."

The thieves looked at each other, then burst into laughter. "You’re gonna have to be more specific, friend," the one at the table smiled. "We rob a lot of folk."

Gorrin’s eyes scanned the room. Then—he saw it. A small leather coin pouch, tucked behind a wooden chest. His pouch. The laughter died. Gorrin lifted his hammer. "You stole from the

wrong dwarf." The thieves stood, hands moving to their weapons. "You’re outnumbered, retard," one of them sneered, pulling free a curved dagger.

Gorrin grinned, rolling his shoulders. "Then I guess I won’t have to go lookin’ for the rest of you later."

The first thief lunged, dagger flashing in the dim light.

Gorrin sidestepped, swinging his hammer low—

CRACK!

The thief’s knee exploded inward, his scream cut short as Gorrin followed up with a brutal swing to the head.

SKULL SHATTERED.

Blood splattered the stone floor.

The second thief came at him fast, sword slicing toward Gorrin’s ribs. Gorrin twisted, but the blade nicked him, drawing a thin line of red across his side. He barely had time to recover before a third thief tackled him, slamming him against the wall. Gorrin let out a guttural roar, bashing his forehead against the attacker’s nose, sending him stumbling backward.

Then, a dagger plunged into his shoulder. Pain flared white-hot, but Gorrin gritted his teeth, grabbing the thief’s wrist and twisting until bones snapped. The thief screamed, but Gorrin didn’t give him a chance—he drove his hammer into his ribs, crushing his chest like a melon.

The fourth thief, the one from the table, drew a crossbow. Gorrin dove just in time—the bolt zipped past his ear, lodging into the wall.

Before the thief could reload, Gorrin charged, grabbed the nearest chair, and smashed it over his head.

The thief slumped to the ground, dazed. The last thief—the one who had stabbed him—was panting, blood on his hands. He looked around, seeing his dead comrades. Then he dropped his weapon. "Wait! Wait! Let’s talk about this!"

Gorrin spat blood onto the ground. "Talkin’ time is over."

With one final swing, his warhammer crushed the last thief’s chest, sending him crashing to the floor, gasping his last breath.

The room was silent. The air thick with blood and death. Gorrin stood there, chest rising and falling heavily, the pain in his wounds pulsing. He staggered to the wooden chest, grabbed his coin pouch, and stuffed it back onto his belt.

Then, he searched the thieves’ bodies and supplies, gathering more silver, his silver dagger and some trinkets.

"Bastards thought they could rob me?"

"They got what was comin' to 'em."

He wiped his hammer clean, took one last look at the carnage he had left behind, and turned to leave. The Thieves' Guild had robbed the wrong dwarf. And tonight, they paid the price in blood. Gorrin went home and slept deeply.

The next day it started with a letter—a formal request from the Cartographers' Guild to the Mining Guild, demanding that certain deep tunnels be re-surveyed before any further mining expansion.

The old maps, they claimed, were inaccurate, outdated, or possibly fraudulent.

But the miners scoffed at the demand.

"What do scribblers know about minin'?" grumbled old Tormek Ironjaw, a miner with four decades of experience. "I've followed these maps since I could hold a pick. Never been wrong before."

"Bah!" added Droga Stoneback, another veteran miner. "Those quill-pushers wouldn't know a tunnel if they fell into one."

But the Mining Guild had to respond. If they ignored the Cartographers, they risked delays, fines, and more bureaucratic headaches.

That's where Gorrin came in.

"Gorrin, you settle this," ordered Thormek Stonebrow, the mine overseer. "Go down there, check the maps, and find out what's what."

Gorrin sighed, rolling his shoulders.

"Aye, fine. But I better get extra pay for this."

Before heading into the deep tunnels, Gorrin first went to the Guild archives, a dusty chamber filled with centuries-old scrolls, ledgers, and maps.

There, a frail, beady-eyed record keeper named Lurvin Inkswell handed him two maps. The Old Mining Guild Map – Drawn nearly 200 years ago, showing a passage labeled 'Vein 12-B' that supposedly ran deep into the mountain. The New Cartographers' Map – Created only a few years ago, which didn't show 'Vein 12-B' at all.

"As you can see, Master Gorrin," Lurvin said in a nasal tone, adjusting his spectacles. "The Cartographers believe 'Vein 12-B' never existed. If your miners say it did, then we must ask —where did it go?"

Gorrin scratched his beard, comparing the maps.

"Only one way to find out," he muttered.

Gorrin led a small survey team down into the deep mines—three miners, including Tormek and Droga, and a cartographer named Ellisar, who carried parchment and a measuring rod.

The deeper they went, the colder and damper the air became. The tunnels were narrow and winding, and soon they arrived at the location where ‘Vein 12-B’ should have been.

What they found?

A solid rock wall.

"Well, there’s yer answer, lad," Tormek said, planting his boots firmly. "This tunnel collapsed long ago. Must’ve been sealed off."

Ellisar frowned. "But the Cartographers say it never existed at all. If that’s the case, then why does this section of rock look… off?"

Gorrin narrowed his eyes.

Now that Ellisar mentioned it… the stone here was different—it didn’t look like a natural cave-in.

"Only one way to know for sure," Gorrin muttered. He hefted his pickaxe and swung.

CRACK.

The stone chipped away too easily.

The miners exchanged glances. "That ain’t normal," Droga muttered.

Gorrin swung again. Then again. The wall gave way. And behind it… A hidden tunnel.

The team stepped inside cautiously. What they found froze them in place.

It was an abandoned mining operation—untouched for who knows how long. Rusty pickaxes and tools still lay scattered on the ground. Old mining carts sat on rusted rails, half-filled with ore. Lanterns, long burned out, hung from hooks in the walls.

It was as if the miners here had simply vanished.

"By the gods…" Tormek whispered.

Ellisar jotted down furious notes. "There’s no record of this mine ever existing."

Gorrin knelt beside a rusted pickaxe, gripping it tightly.

"This was covered up," he muttered. "Someone didn’t want it found."

Droga squatted beside an old ore cart, brushing away the dust. His eyes widened.

"Uh… lads? You might want to see this."

Inside the cart, buried under centuries of dust…

Was raw, untouched iron ore. A rich vein. Gorrin stood slowly, realization hitting him.

"That's why they sealed it," he muttered.

Someone—long ago—didn't want this ore falling into the wrong hands. Maybe it was hoarded for a secret project. Maybe the miners vanished under mysterious circumstances. Or maybe… the Mining Guild back then had secrets they wanted buried. But now? Now, it belonged to them.

When they returned to the Mining Guild, Gorrin gave his full report. The Cartographers were partially right—the map they had was technically correct, but only because the tunnel had been intentionally sealed. The Mining Guild was stunned—no one had known about the abandoned mining operation. The ore was valuable, meaning the Mining Guild had just uncovered a new source of iron.

Thormek Stonebrow listened carefully, then turned to Gorrin.

"You did good work, lad," he admitted, rubbing his chin. "The Guild's got new mining prospects thanks to you."

"Aye, and I expect I'll be paid well for it," Gorrin said with a smile.

Thormek let out a rough chuckle.

"10 silver more per week, starting now."

Gorrin grinned. "Pleasure doin' trade."

Gorrin gained favor with the Cartographers' Guild – They trust him now, knowing he's an honest miner willing to dig up the truth and he also got respect from the Mining Guild.

Though Gorrin had exposed the hidden tunnel and secured a new iron vein for the Mining Guild, something nagged at him.

Why had the old miners vanished without a trace?

Why had the tunnel been sealed so deliberately?

And what if something else was buried even deeper?

A week after the discovery, Gorrin was summoned again by Thormek Stonebrow.

"The Mining Guild wants more answers, lad," the overseer grunted, rubbing his forehead. "Yer the one who found the place. You're goin' back down."

Gorrin crossed his arms. "Aye? And what am I lookin' for?"

Thormek leaned forward.

"Anything that explains why those miners vanished. Records, personal belongings, remains. Find out what the hell happened down there."

Gorrin sighed, cracking his knuckles.

"Guess I better take a few torches, then."

This time, Gorrin took only two others—Droga Stoneback and a Guild scribe named Borik Ledgerbeard.

They descended back into the sealed tunnel, lanterns flickering against the old stone walls.

Everything was just as they had left it—rusted tools, abandoned carts, forgotten iron ore.

But now, they were looking deeper.

Borik scanned the room, then frowned. "There should be a foreman's office or records room. Mining Guilds always had one."

They searched for nearly an hour, checking side tunnels and abandoned workstations.

Then—Gorrin noticed something odd.

A collapsed tunnel, but not like the other cave-ins.

The stone was blackened. Burned. "This ain't normal," he muttered, running his fingers along the charred rock.

Droga squatted down, frowning. "A fire?"

Borik pulled out a dusty old ledger, flipping through brittle pages. His eyes widened. "By the ancestors…"

Gorrin looked up. "What?"

Borik read aloud, his voice low and serious.

"Last entry. '…Something came up from below. Took them in the dark. We sealed the tunnel. It was the only way. May the mountain keep us safe.'"

A cold silence settled over them.

Droga gripped his pickaxe.

"…Took them? Took who?"

Gorrin's grip tightened on his warhammer. "Looks like we ain't just diggin' for ore anymore."

Gorrin sat in Thormek Stonebrow’s office, the air thick with tension.

The ledger from the abandoned mine lay open on the table between them, its pages yellowed with time, stained with soot.

"Something came up from below," Gorrin read aloud. "Took them in the dark. We sealed the tunnel. It was the only way."

Thormek, the Mining Guild overseer, leaned back in his chair, rubbing his forehead.

"And you’re sure about this?"

"Aye," Gorrin said, voice firm. "It wasn’t just a collapse. It was sealed. Deliberately. And whatever was back there, those miners didn’t just leave."

Borik Ledgerbeard, the scribe who had come with them, nodded grimly. "The record speaks for itself. This was no accident."

The room was silent for a long moment.

Then, Thormek let out a deep breath and leaned forward.

"We dig."

Droga Stoneback, standing by the wall, stiffened.

"You sure about that?" he asked cautiously.

Thormek’s eyes hardened. "We don’t leave things buried. We find out what happened. If there’s ore, we mine it. If there’s danger…" he folded his arms, "then we deal with it."

Gorrin felt a knot in his gut.

He’d been half-hoping they’d leave it be.

But now, he was one swing of the pickaxe away from letting it out.

The next day, a team of five miners—including Gorrin, Droga, and Borik—descended back into the forgotten mine.

The sealed tunnel stood before them, blackened with soot and time.

Gorrin gripped his pickaxe tightly.

"Alright, lads. Let’s see what the ancestors were so afraid of."

He swung. CRACK. A chunk of stone crumbled away.

The others followed, hammering and chiseling, breaking through centuries of sealed rock.

Then—a gust of air rushed out from the tunnel. Cold. Unnatural. The lantern flames flickered violently, dimming as if something unseen had sucked the warmth from the air.

Borik shuddered. "Ancestors preserve us…"

Then the last of the stone wall collapsed, revealing a tunnel so dark it seemed to swallow light.

Gorrin gritted his teeth. "We go in. Stay close."

They stepped forward.

The tunnel led them downward, twisting through rough-hewn rock, deeper than any known mining records showed.

Then—they reached a vast chamber.

It was an abandoned forge. Rusted anvils sat in the darkness. Cold, cracked furnaces lined the walls. Mining carts and tools lay scattered… untouched for centuries.

But something was wrong.

Gorrin felt it in his bones. This place wasn't abandoned. It was waiting. Then—Borik gasped. "Look… there!"

Gorrin turned—and his blood ran cold. Three figures stood at the far end of the chamber. Dwarves. Or… what used to be dwarves.

Their flesh was gone, replaced by withered, spectral light, their eyes hollow voids of silver flame.

Their pickaxes and mining tools floated beside them, spectral and sharp as razors.

And then—they moved.

The first wraith lunged toward Droga, its ghostly pickaxe swinging down. CLANG!

Droga barely blocked it with his own pickaxe, but the force sent him stumbling back.

"They still swing like dwarves!" he shouted.

The second wraith turned on Gorrin.

He barely had time to raise his warhammer before it slashed at him, the ethereal blade tearing through his leather armor like cloth.

Pain exploded in his side, a burning cold spreading through him.

"Bastard!" Gorrin roared, swinging wildly. THOOM!

The warhammer connected, but instead of shattering bone, it passed halfway through the wraith—yet the creature recoiled, hissing.

"They ain’t invincible!" Gorrin bellowed.

The third wraith hovered above the ground, its eyes locked on Borik.

The scribe scrambled back, his lantern shaking in his hands.

"Gorrin! What do we do?!"

Gorrin gritted his teeth, ignoring the burning pain in his side.

"Think, damn it!"

Then he saw it— The old forge. The rusted tools. The sigil of the ancestors carved above the furnace. *"This was a smithy once. That means—"*

"GET TO THE FORGE!" Gorrin roared.

The miners rushed toward the ancient anvil, the wraiths circling them like vultures.

"Light the damn furnace!"

Borik, still shaking, grabbed an old firestarter and struck it against the iron grates.

SPARK. FLAMES BURST TO LIFE.

The chamber flooded with heat and light. And the wraiths screamed. They shrieked in agony, their forms shuddering, as if the very presence of the forge was ripping them apart.

Gorrin didn’t hesitate. With a mighty swing, he drove his warhammer straight through the first wraith—and this time, it didn’t just recoil. It disintegrated into dust.

The second wraith let out a haunting wail before it too was engulfed by the holy fire. The third tried to flee, but Droga—with one final, defiant swing of his pickaxe—brought it down. And just like that—they were gone. Silence. Only the crackling forge remained. Gorrin exhaled, clutching his bleeding side. "By the ancestors… what in the deep was that?"

Borik, still pale, stared into the flames. "Not ghosts, not exactly. Something cursed. Something… trapped here."

Droga spat onto the ground. "Not anymore."

Gorrin leaned against the forge, breathing heavily.

Whatever those miners sealed away all those years ago… they weren’t wrong to do it.

And now? They had finished the job. But the question remained—what had cursed these miners? He did not have the answer for now.

After a few days Gorrin strode into the goldsmith's shop, the weight of silver and treasure heavy in his pouch, he had some trinkets to sell he took from the thieves.

The sharp-eyed goldsmith, the same dwarf who had bought from him before, adjusted his spectacles as Gorrin placed the silver dagger, a locket, and a fine necklace onto the counter.

"Back again?" the goldsmith smiled.

"Aye," Gorrin said, arms crossed. "And this time, I expect a fair price."

The goldsmith examined each piece, weighing them with a trained eye.

"Hmmm… fine craftsmanship, real silver, excellent detail on the locket." He set them down and counted out a hefty pouch of coin.

"1,000 silver."

Gorrin nodded, satisfied. He took the coin, stuffing it into his belt pouch, which was growing heavy.

Then he walked straight to the Land Manager's Office.

The clerk, a thin, balding dwarf with ink-stained fingers, barely looked up as Gorrin slapped a deed on the desk.

"I'm sellin'," Gorrin said.

The clerk blinked. "Selling… your home in the slums?"

"Aye."

After a quick assessment, the land manager gave Gorrin 270 silver for it.

Now, Gorrin had 1,500 silver in total.

More than enough to move up in the world.

With his coin pouch bulging, Gorrin made his way to the Merchant's District, searching for a home closer to his shop.

And he found just the right place.

A sturdy stone house—two floors, thick wooden beams, and a reinforced door.

It had a small storage room—perfect for keeping extra goods from his shop. A cozy sitting area with a stone hearth, wide enough to fit a proper cooking pot. A workroom with a heavy oak table—ideal for handling trade records. A bedroom upstairs, large enough for a proper bed, not just a cot.

Gorrin paid the full price—1,500 silver.

The keys were his.

Stepping inside, he took a deep breath.

"This ain't the slums no more."

Over the next few days, Gorrin made several trips through the market, purchasing a solid oak dining table and four sturdy chairs. A proper bookcase, so he could start building a real library. A thick, comfortable bed, layered with boar-hide blankets.A full set of cutlery and plates, no more eating from cheap tin bowls. A heavy iron lock for the front door—just in case.

As he set up his new home, he took a long look around.

A year ago, he had nothing.

Now, he was a merchant, a miner, a trademan with a shop and a proper house.

"Not bad for a lad who started with just an axe and a hammer."

But he wasn't done growing yet.

With his new home settled, Gorrin decided it was time to sharpen his mind as well as his trade.

So, he made his way to the Bookkeeper's Hall, a place filled with ancient tomes, practical manuals, and dwarves hunched over thick ledgers.

The elderly bookkeeper, a wrinkled dwarf named Edrik Tomebrow, greeted him.

"Master Gorrin," Edrik said with a knowing smile, stroking his ink-stained beard. "Not one to read much, are you?"

Gorrin grunted. "I figured it's time I change that."

Edrik nodded in approval. "A wise decision. What knowledge do you seek?"

Gorrin pulled out a list.

"These books. I want them all."

Edrik chuckled, then gathered the tomes, stacking them high.

Gorrin purchased: "The Stonefather's Teachings: A Guide to Ore, Veins, and Riches" – A classic dwarven tome on how to read rock formations, find iron veins, and assess mineral quality. "Deep Delving & Tunnelcraft: A Dwarf's Guide to Safe Mining" – Covers tunnel reinforcement, detecting collapses, and the art of deep mining without bringing the mountain down on your head. "Fire-Damp and Rock Gas: The Invisible Killers Below" – A safety manual on detecting and venting toxic gases that lurk in deep mines before they ignite or choke an entire crew. "The Pickaxe and the Hammer: The Blacksmith's Path from Ore to

Steel" – A practical handbook on smelting raw ore into usable ingots, tools, and weapons. "Fair Weights, Fair Trade: A Merchant's Guide to Honest (and Not-So-Honest) Trade" – Covers market tactics, haggling strategies, and spotting rigged scales or false coin. "The Ale Ledger: Brewing, Buying, and Selling Fine Spirits" – A guide to pricing, storing, and aging ale, with notes on regional specialties—from dwarven firebrew to elven berry wine. "Furs, Pelts, and Hides: The Tanners' Almanac" – Teaches how to assess fur quality, determine fair prices, and spot the difference between a fine pelt and a cheap rat's disguise. "The Road and the Coin: A Trader's Guide to Profitable Journeys" – A handbook on choosing safe trade routes, dodging bandits, and knowing when to bribe a guard or stand your ground.

Edrik watched as Gorrin placed the heavy tomes into his pack.

"Ambitious, aren't we?" the old bookkeeper remarked.

"I got coin, I got a shop, I got a home," Gorrin said with a grin. "Now it's time I get a bit more o' knowledge."

Edrik nodded with approval. "A fine path, indeed. May your wealth grow as deep as the mountain."

Gorrin slung his heavy book-laden bag over his shoulder and made his way back home, ready to fill his shelves.

Back in his new home, Gorrin carefully lined his bookcase with the tomes, running his calloused fingers along their spines.

A year ago, he had been a lone dwarf looking for a place to settle.

Now, he was a merchant with a thriving shop. A respected miner in the Guild. A homeowner in the Merchant's District. A tradesman sharpening his craft

Sitting at his oak table, he opened The Stonefather's Teachings and began to read by lantern light.

"The deeper the rock, the richer the vein."

He smiled. That sounded just about right.

It was a rare day off for Gorrin, and he wasn't about to waste it.

The sun shone bright, warming the stone streets of Dumgral'dur, and Gorrin found himself strolling toward the Black Swan.

The tavern doors creaked as he pushed inside, the rich scent of roasted meat, pipe smoke, and strong ale filling the air.

"Black Mountain Ale," he grunted to the barkeep, dropping a silver coin on the counter.

A frothy mug was soon in his grasp, and he settled into a corner table, letting the cold ale soothe his throat.

Then—a familiar voice.

"Master Gorrin!"

Gorrin glanced up to see the Land Manager of Dumgral'dur—Rurik Steelforge.

A well-fed dwarf with broad shoulders, a fine beard streaked with gray, and a heavy coin pouch at his belt.

"Didn't expect to see you here, Rurik," Gorrin said with a smile.

Rurik chuckled, setting down a heavy mug of ale as he took a seat across from Gorrin.

"A man needs a drink now and then, aye? Even a land manager." He took a hearty swig, then leaned forward. "How's the new home treatin' ya?"

Gorrin grinned. "A damn sight better than the slums, that's for sure."

"That's what I like to hear," Rurik said, nodding approvingly. "Y'know, real estate outside Dumgral'dur is boomin'. If you ever think about ownin' land beyond the city walls, you'd be makin' a fine investment."

Gorrin raised an eyebrow. "That so?"

Rurik smiled. "You've got a good head for trade, Gorrin. Ain't just anyone who goes from a slum miner to a merchant in the Merchant's District."

Gorrin took another long gulp of ale, considering the idea.

"Land outside the city? Hmph… Maybe someday."

Before their conversation could go much further, the doors of the tavern swung open again.

This time, a tall, broad dwarf in a deep-red tunic strode in.

His presence alone made the room quieter.

"Well, well, if it ain't the Mining Guild's own Guildmaster, Ordrik Ironbrand," Rurik said with a grin, raising his mug.

Gorrin straightened in his seat.

Ordrik Ironbrand was a legend in Dumgral'dur. A battle-scarred veteran of the mines, his hands rough as stone, his voice as deep as the mountain itself.

"Rurik, you ol' swindler!" Ordrik boomed, grabbing a mug of Black Mountain Ale and making his way over.

Then, his sharp eyes locked onto Gorrin.

"And this must be the miner who dug up that lost vein."

Gorrin nodded respectfully. "Aye. That was me."

Ordrik pulled up a chair, slamming his mug onto the table. "Then I owe you a drink, lad. You've made the Guild richer."

"I won't say no to that," Gorrin said, clinking mugs with the Guildmaster.

The ale flowed freely, and soon the conversation turned to deep mining, ore veins, and tunnelcraft.

Gorrin, now a seasoned miner himself, spoke with knowledge and confidence—explaining how he identified rock layers, vented fire-damp, and reinforced shafts.

Ordrik listened, eyes narrowing in approval.

"You know your trade, lad," he muttered. "Not just another pick-swingin' grunt, are ya?"

Gorrin shrugged. "I like knowing the stone as much as working it."

Ordrik nodded thoughtfully.

Just as another round of drinks arrived, the tavern doors swung open again—

And in walked another familiar face.

"Ah, look who's here," Rurik chuckled.

It was Ellisar Mapwright, the Cartographers' Guild overseer, a wiry dwarf with keen eyes and ink-stained fingers.

Ellisar smiled as he spotted Rurik, Ordrik, and Gorrin.

"Drinking with both the Land Manager and the Mining Guildmaster? Gorrin, are you secretly running Dumgral'dur?"

"Give it time, lad," Ordrik muttered.

Ellisar grabbed a seat, ordering a lighter ale—cartographers weren't known for their heavy drinking.

"I still remember how we debated those old maps, Gorrin," he said with a chuckle. "Turns out, you were right. The mining maps weren't wrong, just… buried under a bit of history."

"Buried under wraiths, too," Gorrin muttered, taking a deep gulp of ale.

The table erupted in laughter.

By now, the drinks were flowing, voices were louder, and the tavern was roaring with good cheer.

Gorrin leaned back in his chair, enjoying the moment.

Then, Ordrik set down his mug, giving Gorrin a serious look.

"Lad."

Gorrin straightened. "Aye?"

The Guildmaster crossed his arms.

"You're wasted swingin' a pickaxe every damn day."

Gorrin blinked. "What?"

Ordrik leaned forward.

"You found us that lost vein. You know stone. You understand tunnels better than most."

He took another swig of ale, then slammed his mug onto the table.

"I'm promotin' you."

Rurik and Ellisar paused, raising their eyebrows.

Gorrin sat up straighter. "Promotin' me to what?"

Ordrik grinned.

"Mine Overseer."

Silence.

Then Rurik whistled. "Now that's a fine position."

Gorrin was speechless for a moment.

"Overseer? That's a damn sight better than just another miner."

He leaned forward. "And what does that get me?"

Ordrik smiled.

"Double pay. A cut of the profits. Your own crew. And no more grunt work. You plan, you manage, you oversee."

Gorrin grinned.

"Sounds like a fine deal to me."

The Guildmaster raised his mug.

"Then to your new title—Overseer Gorrin."

The table roared in approval, mugs clashed together, and the Black Swan was filled with cheers.

Gorrin sat back, taking it all in.

From a slum miner to a merchant… and now a Mining Overseer.

The air was crisp and smelled of stone and coal smoke as Gorrin rose from his bed, his eyes adjusting to the dim light filtering through his stone-cut window. His new quarters weren't grand, but they were comfortable—a solid bed, a thick boar-hide blanket, and a sturdy desk cluttered with mining reports.

He grunted as he sat up, rubbing the sleep from his eyes. Another damn day in the mines. He could still feel the stiffness in his arms from swinging the hammer last week. Being an overseer meant less digging, but it didn't mean less work.

Rolling out of bed, he stretched his shoulders, then made his way to the small stone table where his morning meal waited—a chunk of black bread, a wedge of hard cheese, and a steaming mug of dwarven coffee strong enough to wake the dead. He took a bite, then a sip, scowling as the bitterness hit his tongue.

"Bah… I should've gone with the ale."

With breakfast done, he grabbed his ledger, skimmed the night shift reports, and frowned. One minor cave-in in Tunnel 4—no injuries, but reinforcements were needed. Ore yields were slightly down—miners weren't hitting good veins in Section 3. One worker caught smuggling raw ore—the bastard would regret it soon enough.

Gorrin sighed, downed the rest of his coffee, and grabbed his belt and work gloves. Time to get to work.

By the time Gorrin arrived at the mine entrance, the morning shift had already gathered. The dwarves stood in rough lines, some shaking off sleep, others chewing tobacco or adjusting their tool belts.

"Right," Gorrin growled, stepping up onto a rock for a better view. "Listen up, you rock-chewin' bastards!"

The miners grinned—they were used to his bark by now.

"Tunnel 4 needs bracin', and we ain't losin' another shaft to laziness. Any fool who cuts corners on beams today will be diggin' out rubble by hand."

A few groans—they all remembered the last time someone ignored safety orders.

"Section 3—yields are low. We're pushin' deeper today, so stay sharp. If the rock don't give, we make it give."

He scanned the crowd, looking for signs of drunkenness. A couple of dwarves were looking too sluggish, their eyes a little too bloodshot.

"Oi, Hrond, you still pissed from last night?"

The dwarf in question blinked. "What? No! Just… eh, maybe a little."

"Good. Then ye'll be diggin' latrines for a week," Gorrin growled. "Ain't sendin' drunks into my mine."

The others chuckled as Hrond groaned.

With that, he handed out work assignments and sent out scouts to inspect deeper veins.

The mine was alive with noise.

The clang of pickaxes against stone echoed through the tunnels, mixing with the creaking of wooden support beams and the distant rumble of ore carts on iron rails.

Gorrin walked through the main shafts, running a calloused hand along the walls.

The stone here was good, rich with iron veins, but some sections looked stressed.

"This tunnel won't hold forever."

He called over Droga, his second-in-command.

"We need more supports here, here, and here," Gorrin said, tapping the stone with his knuckles. "Get the bracers in before shift's end."

Droga nodded. "Aye, overseer."

Moving deeper, Gorrin checked on the digging crews.

"How's the rock treatin' ya, boys?"

One miner wiped his brow. "Stubborn as me mother-in-law, but we're makin' progress."

Gorrin snorted. "Good. Just don't let it collapse on yer head."

At the far end of the tunnel, he tested the air.

Fire-damp.

The smell of stale, dangerous gas.

His stomach tightened.

"Vent this tunnel now," he ordered. "I don’t want to be haulin’ dead dwarves outta here today."

By midday, the miners were sweating, cursing, and covered in dust.

"Break time, ya rock-breakin’ bastards!" Gorrin called.

The miners slumped against the walls, gulping down water and cheap ale.

Gorrin took a seat on a wooden crate, listening as a few dwarves argued.

"I’m tellin’ ya, my pickaxe is sharper than yours," one dwarf boasted.

The other snorted. "Aye, and my granny swings hers faster."

Gorrin chuckled. "Keep arguin’, and I’ll have ye both usin’ yer bare hands."

The argument ended quick.

After the meal break, Gorrin checked on the iron traders, making sure they weren’t robbing the Guild blind.

"Fair prices, boys, or I’ll know," he warned as the weigh stations clanked with ore-filled carts.

At the smelters, he watched molten iron flow into molds, the heat licking at his skin.

A young apprentice blacksmith grumbled about the workload.

Gorrin gave him a hard stare.

"Quit whinin’, lad. The rock don’t care about yer feelin’s—only yer hammerin’."

The blacksmith shut up quick.

As the sun dipped lower, Gorrin gave final orders, ensuring the next shift took over smoothly.

The miners staggered out, dirty, exhausted, and proud.

Gorrin walked with them, but instead of heading home—he turned toward the Black Swan.

"First round’s on me!" he declared, earning a cheer from the tired workers.

The ale flowed, stories were told, and Gorrin leaned back in his chair, feeling the weight of the day lifting.

The work was hard, relentless, and brutal.

But it was his work.

And as long as the mountain stood, so would he.

The weeks turned to months, and Gorrin’s coffers grew heavier.

With his promotion to Mine Overseer, he was now earning 20 silver per week from the Mining Guild, and his shop in the Merchant District was bringing in another 10 silver.

That was 30 silver a week—a small fortune compared to where he started.

But Gorrin was not the kind of dwarf to sit idle and count his coins.

He wanted more.

The shop had become too much to handle alone. With his new duties in the mine, Gorrin had less time to haggle with traders, sort pelts, and handle ledgers.

So, he made a decision.

One afternoon, he placed a hiring notice outside his shop:

"Help Wanted – Steady Pay, Honest Work, and No Thievin’. Apply Inside."

It didn’t take long before a young dwarf woman stepped in.

Her name was Hilda Coppervein—sharp-eyed, quick-tongued, and good with numbers.

She had grown up in a merchant family but wanted to make her own way.

"You ever worked a shop before?" Gorrin asked, crossing his arms.

Hilda smiled. "I ran my father’s ledger since I was twelve. I know how to price goods, handle customers, and spot a bad deal before the ink dries."

Gorrin grunted in approval. "Aye, you’ll do."

They struck a deal—5 silver per week, and Hilda would handle day-to-day sales.

With her behind the counter, Gorrin had more time for bigger things.

As the weeks passed, Gorrin kept remembering what Rurik Steelforge had told him.

"Land outside Dumgral’dur is a good investment."

With the city growing, noble families and merchant lords were snapping up territory beyond the walls.

And Gorrin had no intention of being left behind.

So, one evening, he visited the Cartographers’ Guild, a grand hall filled with maps, survey records, and scribes bent over parchment.

An old cartographer named Master Torrik Mapbeard greeted him.

"Gorrin! What brings you to my little corner of the world?"

"Lookin’ for land, Torrik," Gorrin said, rubbing his beard. "Something close to the city, but not owned by some fancy noble."

Torrik chuckled, leading him to a massive map of the region, pinned to the wall.

"Well, you’re a little late for the prime spots, lad. The nobles have grabbed up most of the best land right outside the city. They’re planning mills, vineyards, some even talk of a tannery."

Gorrin’s eyes narrowed.

Then his gaze drifted to a small plot of land—right next to the noble-owned areas.

"What about that?" he asked, pointing.

Torrik raised a bushy brow. "That? That’s still free. Modest land, but well-placed."

"How much?"

"300 silver."

Gorrin leaned in, studying the map closely.

If nobles and lords were planning breweries, tanneries, and other industry, then this land—right on their doorstep—could be worth far more in the future.

"I’ll let the nobles do all the buildin’, and then I’ll make sure they have to come to me for trade."

Gorrin knew that the mountain was rich.

He had seen silver veins before. He had found nuggets.

And now, with his position as overseer, he had access to the deepest tunnels.

At night, while the day shift slept and the night crews worked the front tunnels, Gorrin would slip away.

His boots made no sound as he ventured into the back tunnels, where few dwarves bothered to go.

Here, the rock was untouched.

Here, there were secrets still waiting to be found.

He worked alone, swinging his pickaxe with methodical precision.

Stone cracked under his strikes, dust settling around him in the dim lantern light.

Each night, he dug deeper, searching, hoping—not for iron, but for silver… or maybe even gold.

"This mountain's given me silver before… what else is she hidin'?"

The risk was high.

If he was caught stealing ore, even as an overseer, he'd be stripped of rank and thrown into dungeon.

But the reward?

If he found a hidden vein, he wouldn't just be a landowner. He could become a rich man. A dwarf with true power. So he dug. And he waited for the mountain to speak.

The halls of the Cartographers' Guild were lined with dusty scrolls, ancient maps, and records stretching back thousands of years. Gorrin had spent the last few weeks visiting the guild, poring over old city blueprints and historical documents, searching for any clues about the mountain's deeper secrets.

One evening, as he flipped through a brittle parchment, his eyes caught something peculiar.

An old map of the mountain.

His breath hitched.

The collapsed tunnel—where he had fought the wraiths of the long-lost miners—was marked on this ancient map.

It wasn't just an old tunnel—it was one of Dumgral'dur's first mines.

And the words scrawled next to it sent a thrill through his veins.

"Rich in gold, silver, and gemstones."

His fingers tightened around the edges of the map.

For centuries, Dumgral'dur had only mined iron ore.

Silver was rare.

Gold? Unheard of.

"But if this old map is right… then the mountain still has riches buried deep."

Gorrin rolled up the parchment, his mind burning with plans.

If gold and gemstones had once been there… then maybe they still were.

And he intended to find out.

From that night on, Gorrin stopped sneaking into the back tunnels of the working mine.

Instead, he ventured into the old collapsed section—the lost mine that had been sealed for centuries.

He knew it was dangerous.

He had seen the wraiths. He had felt the mountain's warning.

And if gold or gems were buried here, then he'd be the one to claim them.

It was the third night of his secret excavations when Gorrin first heard it.

A shuffling sound in the dark.

His lantern flickered, the dim light casting long shadows along the jagged tunnel walls.

Then, from the darkness, something stepped forward.

A creature—small, hunched, with leathery green skin and yellow, sunken eyes.

A goblin.

But not like the ones Gorrin had heard of in tavern tales—this one was different.

Its clothes were tattered, its skin wrinkled, its long fingers curled around a jagged rusted knife.

And when it spoke—its voice was guttural, ancient.

"Zrak tul'gash nar... vrok ta'dul!"

Gorrin frowned.

He had never heard this dialect before.

It was old.

"This bastard's been down here a long time."

He raised his lantern slightly, watching as the goblin tilted its head, peering at him with wide, calculating eyes.

Then, suddenly—it lunged.

The goblin moved fast.

Gorrin barely had time to dodge as the rusted knife slashed through the air, missing his throat by inches.

"No time for weapons."

The goblin stabbed again—this time lower, aiming for his gut.

Gorrin twisted, grabbing the goblin's wrist with iron-strong hands.

The creature snarled, baring rotted teeth, trying to rip its arm free.

But Gorrin was stronger.

With a roar, he drove his forehead into the goblin's skull.

CRACK.

The creature stumbled back, dazed—but not out.

It hissed, then lunged again, teeth snapping at Gorrin's arm.

This time, Gorrin caught the goblin by the throat.

It clawed at his arms, scratching deep into his skin.

But Gorrin didn't let go.

With brutal strength, he slammed the goblin against the tunnel wall, pinning it there.

The creature gasped, writhing, its rusted blade clattering to the floor.

"Yer not gonna gut me, ya little bastard," Gorrin growled through clenched teeth.

The goblin choked, its yellow eyes bulging, legs kicking wildly.

Gorrin's grip tightened. The goblin's struggles weakened. Then—with one final breathless shudder—it went limp. Gorrin held it there for a moment, breathing heavily, heart pounding like a forge hammer. Then he let go, and the creature slumped lifelessly to the ground.

The tunnel was silent once more. Only the sound of Gorrin's heavy breathing remained. He stared down at the body. *"What in the deep hells is a goblin doin' down here?"*

This mine had been sealed for centuries. No dwarves had been here since the old miners vanished. So how long had this goblin been lurking in the dark? And more importantly… Was it alone? Gorrin went back.

Gorrin sat at the edge of his oak table, fingers drumming against the worn wood, his mind replaying the goblin's snarling face, the feral strength in its limbs, and the way it had lunged at him without hesitation.

He had barely survived unarmed.

"That won't happen again."

These old tunnels were more than just abandoned mines. There were creatures down here, things that shouldn't have been alive after centuries.

He needed armor. Weapons. Protection.

So, for the next few days, Gorrin made a plan.

Late at night, he quietly smuggled gear down into the tunnels—piece by piece, wrapped in cloth, hidden in sacks of mining supplies.

No one noticed. No one questioned.

By the fourth night, he had everything he needed. He geared up. His sturdy leather armor, reinforced with iron studs. His steel battle-hammer, heavy enough to crush skulls. A dagger, sheathed at his belt for quick use. A lantern, rope, and a small supply of dried meat and water.

"Now I'm ready."

Slipping into the sealed tunnels, Gorrin moved silently, the only sound the faint drip of water from the ceiling and the distant creak of shifting rock.

This time, he was better prepared.

As he ventured deeper, he ran his fingers over the old carvings in the stone walls—miner names, etched by hands long gone.

"Baldrek Ironvein, Tunnel Chief."
"Hondrik Deepdelver, Master Prospector."
"For the Glory of Dumgral'dur, We Dig."

The air here was different. Thicker. Older. And then—he saw them. Dwarven pillars, rising from the stone like silent sentinels. Ancient archways, beautifully carved, untouched by time.

This had been more than just a mine. It had been a great work of dwarven craft. *"And now, it belongs to the dark."*

He stepped forward—

And his boot sank into something soft.

A deep, wet squelch. Gorrin froze. Then the ground shifted beneath him. Something twitched. Then it moved. A low, guttural hiss filled the tunnel.

The thing beneath his foot writhed—a giant maggot, pale and bloated, with dagger-like fangs.

Its milky-white body coiled as it reared up, mouth opening wide, dripping with thick yellow saliva.

And then—it struck.

Gorrin threw himself sideways as the maggot lunged, its fangs snapping where his throat had just been.

He hit the ground hard, rolling into a crouch, his hand already gripping the warhammer's handle.

The creature turned, its sightless head twitching, sensing his movement.

It hissed again, the air filled with the stench of rot.

"Disgustin' bastard."

Gorrin charged.

He swung his hammer low, aiming for its bloated underbelly.

THOOM!

The impact shook the tunnel walls, sending bits of loose stone raining down.

The maggot shrieked, reeling backward, thick, putrid ichor spilling from its ruptured flesh.

But it wasn't dead.

The beast lunged again, its fangs sinking into Gorrin's armored shoulder.

Pain flared white-hot, but the leather held—barely.

"Yer gonna regret that!" Gorrin growled.

He grabbed the maggot by the throat, planting his feet firm against the stone.

With one mighty heave, he lifted it off the ground and slammed it against the tunnel wall.

CRACK.

Its soft body split open, yellow fluids oozing from its hide.

It twitched, screeched, and then—went still.

The tunnel fell silent.

Breathing heavily, Gorrin wiped the thick maggot blood from his arm, his face twisting in disgust.

"What in the deep hells is next?"

After taking a moment to recover, Gorrin pressed on. The tunnel widened, the air thicker, damp, ancient. Then—a sound. Not a hiss. Not a growl. A voice.

"Hrrmm… who walksss in the deeep darrrk?"

Gorrin’s grip tightened on his hammer.

And then—from the shadows, a figure emerged.

Another goblin.

But this one was different.

It was older, its skin wrinkled and sagging, its eyes green and sharp with intelligence.

And it spoke. In dwarven.

"Who arrre you, masssterr?"

Gorrin hesitated.

No goblin should be speaking his tongue. But he lowered his hammer—just slightly.

"Name's Gorrin."

The goblin tilted its head, sniffing.

"Hmmm… you arrre not like the othersss. You smell of rock and coin. What do you ssseek, masssterr?"

Gorrin narrowed his eyes. "Gold. Gems. Anything worth diggin' up."

The goblin grinned, revealing sharp, rotted teeth.

"Ahh, masssterr is wissse… yes, yesss. Me knowsss… me knowsss the way."

Gorrin frowned. "And why would you tell me?"

The goblin bowed slightly, eyes gleaming.

"Becausse… me hass dwelled in thessse partsss a long time. And me likess a masssterr who knowsss how to dig."

It turned, motioning with a clawed hand.

"Come, masssterr. I ssshow you."

Gorrin's muscles tensed.

This was madness. But he had come this far. And if the goblin spoke the truth…

He might be closer to finding something greater than just silver. Gorrin nodded slowly. "Lead the way."

And with that, he followed the goblin deeper into the lost tunnels.

The air grew thicker as Gorrin followed the goblin deeper into the lost tunnels.

His boots crunched against the ancient stone, the tunnel walls damp with condensation, glistening under the flickering glow of his lantern.

The goblin moved with an eerie silence, its bony feet barely making a sound.

The tunnel twisted and turned, the ceiling narrowing in places, forcing Gorrin to duck beneath jagged rock formations.

Then, the goblin spoke.

"Masssterr wants goldsss and silverssis… yesss?"

Gorrin grunted. "Aye. That's what I'm here for."

The goblin nodded eagerly, its long fingers twitching as it traced the stone walls.

"Many, many massstersss before… came here… diggin', pickin', breaking rocks."

Gorrin's brow furrowed. "The old miners?"

The goblin's toothy grin widened.

"Yesss. Me showssed them, me did. Me led them to the veins, to the shiny treasure under the mountain."

Gorrin narrowed his eyes.

"And what happened to them?"

The goblin stopped walking.

The tunnel fell silent.

Only the drip… drip… drip of water echoed in the distance.

For a long moment, the goblin said nothing.

Then, in a hushed voice, it whispered:

"Then they went into the Deep."

Gorrin's grip on his hammer tightened.

"What's in the Deep?"

The goblin's black eyes flickered, its thin lips curling slightly.

"Me knowsss… me hass seen things. But masssterr wants silversss, yesss?"

It turned abruptly, scuttling forward.

Gorrin exhaled slowly, pushing his unease aside.

For now, he followed.

They walked for minutes that stretched like hours, until the tunnel suddenly widened into an ancient chamber.

Gorrin’s lantern light flickered across intricately carved dwarven archways, their once-sharp patterns worn smooth with age.

The floor was uneven, cracked by time and shifting rock, yet at the center stood something untouched by ruin.

A massive stone slab, inscribed with ancient dwarven runes, towering over a circular fountain.

Fresh mountain spring water gurgled softly from the base, pooling into a shallow basin.

It was pristine. Untouched. Pure.

For a moment, Gorrin simply stood still, staring.

A place of worship.

"This… this is old." His voice was quieter than usual, almost reverent.

The goblin nodded, grinning.

"The old massstersss… they prayed here… they drank here… before they went to the Deep."

Gorrin approached the fountain, kneeling beside the cool, flowing water.

It had been hours since his last drink.

He scooped up the crisp liquid, gulping it down in deep, satisfying swallows.

The water was sweet, cold as the mountain itself, and filled him with a strange, revitalizing energy.

For a moment, he felt as if the stone around him was watching.

Or listening.

He wiped his mouth, stood, and turned back to the goblin.

"Alright, show me this treasure, then."

The goblin’s grin widened.

"Come, masssterr!"

They moved deeper into the tunnel, and soon Gorrin spotted the glint of silver embedded in the rock.

A vein—almost mined out, but not completely.

The goblin gestured toward it, eyes gleaming.

"Isss not much left, but still some for massster."

Gorrin stepped forward, running his fingers along the stone.

His trained eye immediately spotted five large nuggets, peeking out from the brittle rock.

A good find.

He pulled free his dagger, prying the nuggets loose one by one, tucking them into his pouch.

"Not gold, but still worth plenty."

He let out a satisfied grunt, then turned and settled onto a flat rock, taking a moment to rest.

He reached into his pack, pulling free a strip of dried meat and tearing into it.

Then, after a moment's thought, he tossed a piece to the goblin.

The creature caught it midair, sniffed it, then gnawed hungrily.

For a while, neither of them spoke.

Only the low gurgling of the fountain and the faint echoes of dripping water filled the air.

Then Gorrin took a long swig from his waterskin, exhaling slowly.

"So… if ye been down here for so long… why don't ye leave?"

The goblin licked its lips, staring at the flickering lantern light.

"No place for me above. No massstersss… no work. Only shadows."

Its voice lowered.

"And me doess not go deeper. Never deeper."

Gorrin watched him carefully.

"What the hell is in the Deep?"

But for now, he kept his mouth shut.

He had silver in his pocket, armor on his back, and a goblin guide who knew these tunnels well.

For now, that was enough.

"Alright, lad." He stood, adjusting his belt. "Show me more."

The goblin's black eyes twinkled.

"Yesss… yesss. Masssterr is wissse. Come. More treasuresss await."

Gorrin took one last glance at the old runestone, the sacred fountain, the ruins of a past long forgotten.

Then, gripping his warhammer, he followed the goblin deeper into the dark.

The tunnel widened, opening into a cavernous chamber where the air was thick with dust and ancient silence.

Gorrin’s lantern cast flickering shadows over the grand sight before him—a massive stone door, carved with intricate dwarven runes.

The goblin scurried to the side, its black eyes gleaming with curiosity.

"Masssterr… sssomething great is beyond… but door hasss been shut for a long, long time."

Gorrin stepped forward, running his calloused fingers over the engravings.

The mechanism was true dwarven craft—a complex system of gears, levers, and counterweights, all designed to move a slab of stone heavier than a war wagon.

But time had done its damage.

The gears were rusted, wedged tight with dust and debris.

The counterweights had snapped from their moorings.

And one of the primary levers had broken off entirely.

"Ain’t nothin’ easy, is it?" Gorrin muttered under his breath.

The goblin tilted its head. "Isss broken, masssterr? Isss lost forever?"

Gorrin grinned, rolling up his sleeves.

"Nah. Just needs a proper dwarf to fix it."

First, Gorrin knelt before the rusted gears, using his chisel and hammer to chip away the layers of corrosion.

Each strike sent dust flying, flakes of ancient metal falling like dead leaves.

The goblin watched, fascinated.

"Masssterr knowsss much."

"Aye, and this door’s still fightin’ me."

A stubborn gear refused to budge.

Gorrin gritted his teeth, wedging his dagger between the teeth of the cog and prying it loose with all his strength.

With a loud snap, the piece broke free.

The gears shuddered, groaning under their own weight.

"That's one problem solved."

Gorrin scanned the chamber, searching for anything that could replace the missing counterweight.

His eyes landed on a pile of old mining tools, half-buried beneath fallen stone.

With a grunt, he dug through the rubble, his fingers brushing against cold iron.

A chain—heavy, thick, still intact.

"Well, look at that."

With some effort, he dragged the chain over, securing it around the mechanism.

It wasn't perfect, but it would hold.

"This better work."

Gorrin stood back, wiping sweat from his brow.

Now came the real challenge.

If he reset the system wrong, he could trigger some old dwarven defense system, or worse—lock the door permanently.

His fingers traced the ancient engravings, deciphering their meanings.

- Pull the left lever first… then shift the center weight… reset the right gear last.

"Alright, here goes nothin'."

He pulled the first lever. A deep grinding sound rumbled through the chamber. The goblin hissed, stepping back. Next, he shifted the counterweight into place. A second groan of stone on metal echoed through the tunnel. Finally, with a deep breath, Gorrin reset the last gear.

CLUNK.

The entire door shuddered. The goblin held its breath. And then—with a deep, thunderous rumble—the stone door slowly slid open.

Beyond the threshold, darkness yawned, thick and undisturbed for centuries.

A crypt. A place of old dwarven dead. The air that seeped out was cold—not just from the mountain, but from something else. Something waiting. Gorrin exhaled, gripping his warhammer.

The goblin whispered, voice almost reverent.

"Masssterr… we go in?"

Gorrin stepped forward.

"Aye… we go in."

The crypt smelled of ancient dust and cold stone, a scent so old it felt like the mountain itself was holding its breath.

Gorrin stepped cautiously, his boots echoing in the wide, domed chamber.

Four massive sarcophagi stood in the center, each engraved with dwarven runes, their lids adorned with intricate carvings of the ones buried within.

He knelt, tracing the faded words with his calloused fingers.

The first sarcophagus read:

"Thalgrun Oreheart – Laid to Rest in the Year Before the Last Moons."

The second:

"Brokdur Stoneborn – Slain in the Wars of the Deep, Before the Age of Thulgar."

The third:

"Dorin Blackfist – Who Fell Against the Night Terrors, in the Time Before the Great Collapse."

The last bore an ominous inscription:

"Morgun Hollowvein – Laid to Rest That He May Not Rise Again."

Gorrin frowned at the last one.

"That's a bit of a strange thing to write on a tombstone, eh?"

The goblin shifted uneasily, its black eyes darting between the stone caskets.

"Masssterr… perhapsss… we leave them be?"

Gorrin grinned, gripping the edge of one sarcophagus lid.

"Ain't my grandfathers."

With a grunt, he pried it open.

And the crypt came alive.

As soon as the lid slid back, an unholy whisper echoed through the chamber.

The skeleton of Thalgrun Oreheart sat up, its hollow eye sockets glowing with a ghostly silver light.

Its jaw creaked open in a silent snarl as it lunged for Gorrin with bony fingers like daggers.

"Ah, hells!" Gorrin barely had time to throw himself back as the undead dwarf lunged, swinging a rusted battleaxe that had somehow survived the centuries.

The axe's edge scraped across Gorrin's shoulder, cutting through leather and into flesh.

Pain flared, warm blood seeping into his armor.

"Bastard's still got some swing!" Gorrin growled, gripping his warhammer tightly.

The goblin hissed, drawing a jagged knife and leaping at the skeleton's side.

The creature backhanded the goblin with unnatural strength.

CRACK.

The goblin slammed into the wall, its thin body hitting with a sickening thud before crumpling to the ground, motionless.

"Ah, damn. That's gonna hurt in the mornin'."

Gorrin gritted his teeth, ignoring the pain in his shoulder.

The skeleton charged again, axe raised high.

This time, Gorrin was ready.

He ducked low, avoiding the swing, then drove his warhammer up in a crushing arc.

THOOM!

The hammer smashed into the skeleton's ribcage, shattering bone.

The undead dwarf staggered back, but did not fall.

"Stubborn bastard, ain't ya?"

The skeleton swung again—wild, furious.

Gorrin dodged left, bringing his hammer downward, straight onto its skull.

CRACK.

The glowing light in its eyes flickered—then went dark.

The skeleton collapsed into a pile of dust and broken bones.

Gorrin exhaled heavily, wiping his forehead.

"One down."

He turned toward the goblin, who was slowly sitting up, groaning.

"Still alive?"

The goblin wheezed, rubbing its ribs. "Me thinksss so…"

Gorrin chuckled, then glanced back at the sarcophagus.

Inside, amid the dust and bones, were two silver goblets and an old, leather-bound tome.

He picked up the book, dusting off the cover.

The title was written in old dwarven script:

"Histories of the Forefathers: The Golden Age of Dumgral'dur."

"Well now… this could be worth somethin'." He tucked the book and goblets into his sack.

Then he turned toward the other sarcophagi.

His conscience twinged.

But he shook it off.

"Ain't my grandfathers."

He pried open the second sarcophagus.

And again, the dead did not rest.

The moment the lid slid away, the skeleton of Brokdur Stoneborn jerked upright, its hands clutching a broken war-pick.

The goblin hissed, leaping forward before the creature could fully rise, slashing at its exposed spine.

The knife cut through rotted cloth, but the skeleton didn't even flinch.

Instead, it snapped out with one bony fist, grabbing the goblin by the throat and lifting him off the ground.

"Ghhkkk!" the goblin choked, its feet kicking wildly.

Gorrin roared, swinging his hammer in a crushing blow—

SMASH!

The skeleton’s arm shattered, freeing the goblin, who fell, gasping for air.

But the creature kept coming.

Gorrin barely had time to react as the war-pick slashed across his thigh, ripping through his trousers and sending pain lancing up his leg.

He gritted his teeth, ignoring the agony.

"Yer tougher than the last one."

The skeleton raised its weapon for a final strike—

But Gorrin lunged first.

With all his strength, he grabbed the creature’s skull with both hands… and twisted.

SNAP.

The head ripped free, and the skeleton collapsed into a heap of bones.

Panting, Gorrin threw the skull aside.

"Two down."

The goblin coughed, rubbing its neck.

"Masssterr is… very strong."

"Aye. Strong, and now covered in my own blood."

With his leg throbbing, he limped toward the next sarcophagus.

The last two skeletons rose just like the first.

Dorin Blackfist, wielding a rusted shortsword, fought like a trained warrior, parrying Gorrin’s hammer strikes until a well-placed blow shattered his ribs.

Morgun Hollowvein, the last and strangest of them, did not wield a weapon but instead tried to grapple Gorrin, its fingers wrapping around his throat with unnatural strength.

The goblin stabbed it from behind, giving Gorrin just enough time to smash its skull into dust.

By the end, Gorrin was bleeding, bruised, and cursing under his breath.

He sat down, exhaling slowly.

"That’s enough o’ that, I think."

The goblin limped over, rubbing its ribs.

"Masssterr… sstill wants treasuresss?"

Gorrin sighed, then grinned.

"Aye. Might as well see what the dead left behind."

Inside the last sarcophagus, he found a few gold coins, a small gemstone, and an intricately carved silver belt buckle.

Then he stuffed them into his sack.

And together, he and the goblin pressed deeper into the dark.

The tunnel opened into a vast hall, its towering pillars carved from the very bones of the mountain.

Gorrin paused at the threshold, his breath slow, taking in the sheer craftsmanship before him.

Even after centuries of ruin, the architecture remained majestic—vaulted ceilings, walls lined with relief carvings of dwarven warriors and miners, and in the center of it all…

A massive inscription, etched into the stone.

Or what was left of it.

Chunks of runes had been deliberately destroyed, their shapes scratched out, edges chiseled away, as if someone—or something—had tried to erase its meaning from history.

Gorrin ran a calloused hand over the scars.

"This wasn’t just time that did this… this was deliberate."

The goblin sniffed, baring its teeth in a crooked grin.

"Heh. Whatever’s scratched out, yer kin didn’t want found."

Gorrin narrowed his eyes.

"Or maybe… someone didn’t want us to remember."

Carefully, Gorrin pulled a small roll of parchment from his pack, along with a charcoal stick.

With steady hands, he pressed the parchment to the stone, rubbing the charcoal over the remaining runes, preserving their shapes before time could steal them away forever.

The goblin watched, fascinated.

"Masssterr sssavesss the wordsss?"

"Aye. Whatever this was, it was important."

After a few minutes of careful work, Gorrin leaned back, studying what was left.

Only a handful of words remained.

The Fragmented Inscription

"…Deep below, where the first halls were struck…
…beyond the sight of the Stonefather's gaze…
…gold was not a blessing, but a curse…
…we sealed the gate, but the hunger remained…
…it waits in the dark, forgotten."

Gorrin felt a cold chill creep up his spine.

"Gold was a curse? What in the hells does that mean?"

The goblin tilted its head, reading aloud.

"Heh. Hunger. Isss not a word dwarvesss use lightly."

"No. It ain't."

Gorrin sat down, pulling out the old book he had looted from the crypt:

"Histories of the Forefathers: The Golden Age of Dumgral'dur."

He carefully flipped through the yellowed pages, searching for anything about the first mines, the sealed tunnels, or curses.

Then, he found something.

A passage, old but preserved.

And it spoke of the Deep.

"...In the early days of Dumgral'dur, before iron fed the forges, before silver lined the coin purses of the great houses, there was gold. Not in specks, nor in thin veins, but in rivers beneath the stone, gleaming in the dark like the light of forgotten gods."

“…But those who dug deepest into the golden halls did not return whole. Their bodies remained, but their minds unraveled, their eyes turned black as the abyss. They heard whispers in the stone, and in their greed, they listened.”

“…It was not wealth they found, but hunger.”

“…The elders called it ‘The Deep Curse.’ The last of them sealed the tunnels, not to hide riches, but to bury what lay beyond them.”

Gorrin sat back, heart pounding.

"Hells."

This wasn’t just a forgotten mine.

This was a burial ground of something worse than death.

He exhaled slowly, looking toward the cracked inscription.

Someone—his ancestors, perhaps—had gone through great efforts to keep this place hidden.

To erase its memory.

And yet, here he was.

The goblin shifted uncomfortably.

"Masssterr looksss… troubled."

"Troubled’s a word for it." Gorrin rubbed his beard, deep in thought.

He could turn back.

Leave this place undisturbed, go back to his shop, to his mine, to his growing fortune.

"But…"

He clenched his fists.

"If this gold still exists… if these tunnels weren’t just abandoned but SEALED… then what were they hiding?"

His curiosity burned hotter than his fear. He had to know. But he also had to be careful. Gorrin stood up, rolling the parchment carefully, tucking the book into his sack.

"We ain’t stoppin’ now."

The goblin grinned nervously.

"Masssterr is brave… or foolish."

"Maybe both." Gorrin took a deep breath. "Either way, I ain't leavin' yet."

The tunnel stretched farther than expected, the air growing thicker, cooler, and damp as Gorrin followed the goblin's swift, silent steps.

The flickering light from his lantern danced against the rock, casting long, unsettling shadows against the ancient dwarven carvings that lined the walls.

The goblin scurried ahead, sniffing at the air, before stopping abruptly.

"Here, masssterr. Another one."

Gorrin stepped forward, his boots scraping against loose pebbles.

Before him lay another vein—most of the silver had been extracted long ago, but a few stubborn nuggets still clung to the rock.

"Not much left… but enough for me." Gorrin grinned, slinging his pickaxe from his belt.

The first strike rang out, the metallic clang echoing down the empty tunnels.

The second sent dust crumbling from the ceiling.

With each swing, small glints of silver peeked through the stone.

Finally, after several well-placed strikes, three more nuggets came free, tumbling into his palm.

He weighed them in his hand, nodding in satisfaction, before tucking them into his pouch.

"That'll do."

Gorrin turned toward the goblin, exhaling a deep breath.

"That's enough fer today. Time to get outta this place."

The goblin nodded eagerly, turning and leading him back through the winding corridors.

As they neared the sealed mine entrance, Gorrin glanced at the strange little creature.

"You want anything?" he asked.

The goblin tilted its head, blinking.

Then, in a rasping voice, it muttered:

"Meatsss."

Gorrin smiled.

"I’ll bring ye some next time. Don’t go dyin’ on me before then."

The goblin let out a low, croaking chuckle before vanishing into the darkness.

Once he reached the main mines, Gorrin changed clothes, stashing away his armor and weapons in the hidden old tunnels.

His hammer remained behind—no use drawing attention to it—but he still had his sword back at home.

By the time he reached his stone-built home in the Merchant’s District, the city had grown quiet, only the distant sounds of drunken laughter from the taverns filling the streets.

He collapsed onto his bed, exhausted.

But sleep brought no peace.

That night, he dreamed of the depths.

Of voices whispering from the stone, of gold that bled black when touched.

Of shadows moving in the tunnels where no light could reach.

And somewhere, deep below, something stirred.

Morning came too soon.

The knock on his door jolted him awake.

"Oi, Overseer, get yer arse up!"

With a groan, Gorrin dragged himself from bed, his muscles stiff from the previous night’s exertions.

He washed quickly, threw on his mining tunic and belt, and grabbed a chunk of black bread and cheese, eating on the way as he trudged toward the mines.

The moment he arrived, the morning shift had already gathered, waiting for orders.

Gorrin adjusted his gloves, cracking his neck.

"Right, ye lazy rock-breakers, listen up!"

His voice boomed through the tunnels, silencing the chatter.

"Tunnel Three needs reinforcement—last thing I want is haulin’ out bodies ‘cause ye didn’t brace the beams right."

A few dwarves muttered, nodding.

"Cart rails in Shaft Six need checkin'. If they jam again, someone's gettin' thrown down a hole."

Laughter rippled through the crew.

Gorrin continued, pacing in front of the workers.

"And someone get me the damn ore reports from the night shift. I wanna know if we hit anything worth diggin'."

His duties for the day began, filled with checking reinforcements in tunnels—making sure support beams were holding. Inspecting ore carts—ensuring smooth transport and kicking any slacker who let them jam. Dealing with complaints—mostly petty disputes over tool ownership or some fool claiming another dwarf stole his lunch. Weighing and logging ore loads—to make sure no one was skimming iron off the top. Speaking with the blacksmiths—confirming that pickaxes, hammers, and chisels were properly maintained. Overseeing new digs—watching for fire-damp gas or unstable rock formations.

By midday, Gorrin took a short break, drinking a tin mug of cold water, munching on stone-baked bread and dried meat.

As he chewed, his thoughts drifted back to the tunnels beneath the crypt.

The ruined inscription.

The words of the old dwarves, lost to time.

And the thing they had buried deep.

"Hells, I should leave well enough alone."

But he knew himself better than that. He had to go back.

The heavy pouch of gold sat in Gorrin's palm as he left the goldsmith's shop, a satisfied grin tugging at his lips.

"Two hundred gold… that's a damn fine haul."

The silver nuggets, goblets, and gemstone had fetched him far more than he expected.

For the first time in a long while, he felt truly ahead.

Not just scraping by. Not just surviving.

He was building something.

And tonight?

Tonight, he'd enjoy himself.

The Black Swan Tavern was already alive with noise by the time Gorrin pushed open the heavy wooden doors.

The scent of roast meats, spiced potatoes, and strong ale filled the air, mingling with the low hum of a dwarven ballad played by a lute-strumming bard.

Gorrin grunted in approval.

"A fine place to spend a bit o' coin."

He strode to the counter, nodding to the tavern keeper, a burly dwarf named Brumli Kegbeard.

"Brumli! Gimme yer finest meal and a bottle o' the special dwarven wine. None of that watered-down swill."

Brumli chuckled, wiping down a mug.

"Got coin to burn, eh, Gorrin? You strike gold in the mines?"

Gorrin smiled. "Somethin' like that."

Soon enough, a hearty plate was set before him—slow-roasted boar, buttered root vegetables, thick slices of crusty bread, and a hearty side of melted cheese.

The bottle of deep-red dwarven wine gleamed under the tavern's lantern light.

He poured himself a glass, swirled it, and took a long sip.

"Hells, that's smooth."

For the next hour, Gorrin ate, drank, and enjoyed the warmth of the tavern, letting the soothing melody of the bard's song sink into his bones.

After his second glass, he leaned back, pulling his clay pipe from his belt pouch.

With a small flick of flint, he lit the packed hemp, drawing in a slow, deep breath.

The rich, earthy smoke curled around him as he exhaled, his mind drifting to the tunnels, the goblin, the old ruins.

"Maybe this whole thing's bigger than I thought… but for tonight? It can wait."

The Merchant's District was quieter by the time Gorrin made his way to his shop.

The lanterns still burned inside, casting a warm glow onto the cobbled street.

As he pushed open the door, the familiar scent of dried herbs, leather, and aged wood filled his nose.

Behind the counter stood Hilda Coppervein, sleeves rolled up, jotting down numbers in the shop’s ledger.

She glanced up, her sharp brown eyes lighting up.

"Ah, there’s my favorite lazy boss, finally showin’ his face."

Gorrin grinned, stepping inside.

"Aye, had to make sure ye weren’t runnin’ off with all my coin."

Hilda snorted, setting the quill down.

"If I wanted to steal from ya, Gorrin, I’d have done it ages ago. But don’t worry, trade is thrivin’."

She gestured to the shelves, now stocked with more goods than ever.

"I’ve expanded the shop’s inventory—got dried fish from the river folk, good sheep wool from the hill clans, bear pelts from trappers, and some of the finest cheeses ye’ll find in Dumgral’dur."

Gorrin arched an eyebrow, impressed.

"Look at ye, runnin’ this place better than I do. Maybe I should just let ye take over."

Hilda laughed, crossing her arms.

"Might not be a bad idea. But if ye think I’ll let ye sit around smokin’ yer pipe while I do all the work, ye got another thing comin’."

Gorrin chuckled.

"Aye, aye. Good work, lass."

Then, with a grin, he stepped closer, pressing a quick kiss to her cheek.

Before she could react, he gave her a firm pinch on the ass.

"For yer hard work."

Hilda yelped, eyes widening, before she smacked his arm—hard.

"Oi, ye dirty bastard! Try that again, and I’ll throw ye out the damn shop!"

But there was a smile tugging at her lips, and Gorrin knew she wasn’t truly mad.

"Aye, aye. Just showin’ appreciation."

With that, he grabbed a small wedge of cheese from the counter, took a bite, and nodded in approval.

"Damn good stuff. Keep doin’ what ye do, Hilda."

She rolled her eyes, but her smile lingered as Gorrin stepped back into the night, his pouch heavier with coin, his mind lighter than it had been in days.

For now, things were good.

But he knew the deep tunnels still called to him.

And next time, he wouldn’t just be looking for silver.

The Land Manager’s Office was a sturdy stone building, its halls lined with records of landowners, estates, and the growing city’s expansion.

Gorrin strode inside, the clink of heavy silver coins in his pouch a satisfying weight at his side.

Behind a massive oak desk, Rurik Steelforge, the city’s land manager, adjusted his spectacles and peered over a parchment.

"Gorrin Stonefist, eh? Finally makin’ a proper investment?" Rurik smiled, rubbing his ink-stained fingers together.

Gorrin grunted, placing his pouch on the desk.

"Aye. I’ll take the land next to the nobles’ plots. 300 silver, as agreed."

Rurik raised an eyebrow but nodded.

"Smart move. Nobles’re plannin’ industry. Tannery, brewery, mills—it’ll be prime land soon enough."

With a signature on parchment and the exchange of coin, Gorrin became a landowner.

"Another step forward."

By midday, Gorrin had hitched his cart and left the city gates, making the short journey out to his new property.

Already, the sounds of industry filled the valley.

Dwarves hammered at timber beams, assembling the framework of a mill.

A tannery’s stone walls were half-built, its large wooden vats being positioned for work.

The brewery’s foundation was laid, and dwarves were already rolling barrels of grain and hops onto the site.

Gorrin stood on a small rise, arms crossed, surveying his new neighbors.

He felt satisfied. This was progress.

"A few years from now, this land's gonna be worth twice what I paid."

With a smile, he turned his cart back toward Dumgral'dur.

He had another errand before he returned to the mines.

The butcher's shop was one of the best in the city, filled with the rich scent of smoked meats, blood sausage, and freshly cut venison.

A bald, heavy-set dwarf with a thick mustache looked up from his work.

"Stonefist! What can I get ye?"

"A deer leg. Whole. Big one."

The butcher snorted.

"Feedin' an army?"

Gorrin grinned.

"Somethin' like that."

A few minutes later, Gorrin left the shop, a massive deer leg wrapped in cloth resting in his cart.

By evening, he was back in the mines, preparing for his return to the tunnels.

Armor tightened. Hammer checked. Lantern filled. Pack secured.

As he stood at the old tunnel entrance, a familiar rasping voice echoed from the dark.

"Ahhh, the massster returnsss!"

The goblin slinked from the shadows, its black eyes gleaming with hunger.

Gorrin tossed the deer leg toward him.

The goblin caught it eagerly, sinking its jagged teeth in immediately.

Within minutes, the leg was stripped clean, only bone remaining.

The goblin burped loudly, licking its fingers.

"Massster bringsss good meatsss. Very good massster."

Gorrin chuckled.

"Let’s get movin’. Show me where this treasure o’ yers is."

The goblin nodded eagerly.

"Yesss, massster. But… deeper, there are old onesss. Me doess not like them. If massster wants, me can take him… but first! Treasuresss. Come!"

The tunnels grew darker, colder, the air thick with the scent of damp stone.

After nearly an hour of walking, the goblin suddenly stopped, pointing.

"There, massster. The rockss sssparkle."

Gorrin stepped forward, lantern illuminating a glimmering silver vein running along the tunnel wall.

Unlike the half-dug scraps of past miners, this was a full, untouched vein.

"Hah! Look at that." Gorrin cracked his knuckles.

He swung his pickaxe, the impact ringing through the empty cavern.

Each strike chipped away stone, revealing more pure silver beneath.

The work was hard, sweat forming on his brow, but after nearly an hour of effort, he had extracted a large chunk of raw silver ore.

He hoisted it into his sack, already feeling the weight of profit.

"That’s a fine haul."

The goblin grinned.

"Yesss, massster finds shinies. But… deeper, massster. Come… come."

They pressed on.

Hours passed.

The deeper they went, the more ancient the tunnels became—pillars with forgotten dwarven runes, walls lined with mysterious carvings.

Then, suddenly— Clink. Clink. Clink. A sound echoed from ahead.

Gorrin froze. His hand tightened around his hammer.

"Pickaxes…? This deep?"

The goblin hissed.

"They dig. They dig."

Gorrin’s blood ran cold.

"Who?"

The goblin did not answer. But the clinking grew louder.

The goblin stopped, his hunched form trembling slightly, his black eyes darting forward toward the tunnel’s deep darkness.

"Masssterr… me doess not go further. Thisss… this is the place of the old onesss."

Gorrin paused, gripping the hilt of his hammer.

"What do ye mean? Who are they?"

The goblin shook his head violently.

"They live where the light never touchesss. They dig… they build… they grow. Masssterr goesss alone."

The hairs on Gorrin’s neck bristled.

But curiosity burned stronger than caution.

He took a step forward.

Then another.

The goblin remained behind, watching with wide, fearful eyes.

And then Gorrin stepped into the great hollow—and his breath caught in his throat.

It was a city, vast and ancient, carved into the very heart of the mountain’s belly.

Towering blackstone pillars, engraved with unknown runes, stretched upward into a ceiling lost in darkness.

Massive stone halls—some half-built, some worn with age—lined cobblestone streets, their archways adorned with glowing gemstones that cast an eerie, red-tinted light throughout the cavern.

There were buildings, their rooftops arched, their walls engraved with unfamiliar symbols.

Bridges of iron and obsidian stretched across deep crevices, where lava bubbled far below, casting the lower quarters in an ominous glow.

And everywhere—they were digging.

Dozens, hundreds of dwarves—but not like the ones from Dumgral'dur.

Their skin was dark as shadow, almost black, their eyes a deep, piercing red, burning like embers in the dark.

They wielded pickaxes, chisels, hammers—building, expanding, working.

They did not seem to notice him at first.

Gorrin felt his stomach tighten.

"By the Stonefather… these ain't just any dwarves."

"These are the old ones."

Or their descendants.

Those who had vanished into the Deep.

And they had thrived.

Gorrin moved cautiously, walking past massive, iron-wrought statues of unknown dwarven kings, their features stern, unforgiving, immortalized in the black stone.

Then he saw the market.

A true market, much like the one in Dumgral'dur—except instead of wheat and cattle, instead of ale and tools, these dwarves traded raw treasure, mushrooms, algae and some meats of unknown origin.

Tables piled high with gold nuggets, silver chunks, gleaming gemstones of deep crimson, sapphire blue, and glimmering emerald green.

Weapons of obsidian and steel, curved blades and heavy hammers lined the stalls, traded for ore and stone.

Thick pelts of deep-cave beasts hung on racks, stitched together with blackened sinew. The air smelled of burning metal, hot rock, and something faintly sulfuric. This was a true civilization, hidden beneath the mountain for thousands of years. Gorrin moved toward a vendor's stall, still in disbelief.

His presence, at last, was noticed. A dark-skinned dwarf, taller than most surface kin, wearing a cloak of black wolf pelts, turned sharply—his red eyes narrowing at the sight of Gorrin.

There was a pause. A long silence.

Then the duergar spoke, his voice gravelly, ancient, carrying the weight of forgotten years.

"By the Hollow Veins…" he muttered.

"A surface dwarf."

Gorrin swallowed hard.

The duergar stepped closer, looking him over, eyes gleaming with curiosity and caution.

"We have not seen one of your kind in… thousands of years."

Gorrin’s heart thudded in his chest. This was no lost ruin. This was a kingdom. And he had just walked straight into it.

Gorrin felt the weight of the duergar’s red gaze, the way it studied him, measured him, judged him.

He kept his stance firm, his voice steady.

"I found the old tunnel. Dug through the collapsed rock. On the surface, we have stories—histories of the old ones—but no one truly knows what happened to ye."

The duergar narrowed his eyes, lips curling slightly.

"And now you do."

Gorrin nodded.

"Aye. And what I see is a people thrivin’, buildin’, expandin’." He gestured toward the market, the forges, the deep stone halls beyond. "Yer not just some lost clan buried in history. Ye made somethin’ down here."

The duergar’s expression remained unreadable.

"We have forgotten the surface. And the surface has forgotten us. That is how it was meant to be."

Gorrin crossed his arms, arching a brow.

"Maybe. But maybe it’s time the surface and the deep did a bit o’ trade."

The duergar merchant studied him, considering.

Then, in a slow, deliberate motion, he gestured to the gold and silver spread across the market stalls.

"You surface dwarves value these things, yes? You seek silver, gold, gems?"

Gorrin nodded.

"Aye. Always have. Always will. Question is—how much does it cost me?"

The duergar’s smile was faint, but it was there.

"Prices depend on what you can offer. Surface goods are… rare here. There are things we cannot produce, things we need."

Gorrin’s mind churned.

"I could turn a profit here… make a fortune if I play this right."

"What do ye need?"

The duergar listed items in an oddly vague manner—supplies that seemed basic at first but carried strange implications. Grain, dried meats, and surface foodstuffs. Iron ingots, though they had plenty, they sought different forging techniques. Ale and spirits, but strong enough to last long travel underground.

It all seemed straightforward.

And then came the gold.

"If you bring these things… we will allow a trade. A fair exchange. And, in time, perhaps a sample of the gold we possess."

Gorrin stroked his beard.

"A sample? Hah. Let's talk prices then. How much for a nugget of gold? Silver? Gems?"

The duergar merchant spoke in a roundabout manner, numbers shifting, phrases looping back on themselves, agreements folding within agreements.

Gorrin's brow furrowed, but the logic, though confusing, made sense.

Or at least, it seemed to.

"So if I provide goods, ye'll give me gold at that rate?"

"Of course. The terms are clear."

The duergar produced a stone tablet, etched with a contract in precise, deep-cut runes.

Gorrin barely glanced at it.

"Bah, a trade's a trade. Standard agreements."

With a firm nod, he pressed his thumb into the wax seal, stamping his mark.

The duergar's eyes flickered briefly, the faintest smile on his lips.

The contract snapped shut with finality.

"It is done."

Gorrin exhaled.

"Right then. I'll set up the first shipment soon. Just need to bring the goods from the surface."

The duergar inclined his head.

"Yes… but there is also another part."

"Another part?" Gorrin frowned.

"You signed the contract. It includes a work agreement. A debt to be paid before trade is completed."

The words hit Gorrin like a hammer strike.

His stomach turned.

"What? I never agreed to no bloody—"

His eyes darted back to the stone tablet, to the fine-carved runes beneath the main trade agreement.

There, written in ironclad duergar law, were the conditions he had not bothered to read. Mine 200 pounds of rare ore deep within the Duergar tunnels. Deliver a shipment of surface goods to the dangerous underground settlement. Only after fulfilling this obligation would trade truly begin.

Gorrin's jaw tightened.

"Ye tricked me."

The duergar's expression remained neutral, calm, unreadable.

"You signed willingly. And in our society, a contract once signed is sacred. A dwarf does not break his word."

His red eyes gleamed.

"Failure to honor a deal leads to… permanent servitude."

Gorrin's heart pounded.

He had just signed himself into a dangerous job in the Deep.

And there was no walking away from it.

Gorrin stared at the contract once more, the weight of it pressing against his chest.

He had given his word.

And for a dwarf, that was everything.

There was no walking away from this.

"Fine. Ye want ore? I'll dig it up."

"But I'll do it my way."

Gorrin spent the next few days thinking, working out the best way to fulfill the contract without disrupting his life on the surface.

He couldn't just vanish from Dumgral'dur for weeks.

"No, I need to work smart."

His solution?

Work at night.

Every evening, after his usual overseer duties at the mines, he would venture down into the Deep and mine the rare ore.

But then came another issue—the deliveries.

The contract required him to bring surface goods to the Duergar market as part of his deal.

But that would mean too much traveling, too much risk.

"Hells, I need someone else to do the haulin'."

And then it hit him.

The goblin.

That night, as Gorrin descended into the old tunnels, the goblin emerged from the dark, its black eyes gleaming in the lamplight.

"Ahhh, masssterr returnsss. Isss it more silver ye ssseek?"

Gorrin smiled.

"Not this time, rat. I got another job for ye."

The goblin tilted its head, intrigued.

"Masssterr… needss help?"

Gorrin crossed his arms.

"Aye. I got a deal with the deep-dwellers. They need food, ale, pelts—all the stuff they can't make down here. I need someone to take the shipments to 'em."

The goblin grinned, showing its jagged teeth.

"Ahhh… and masssterr thinksss me is good for it?"

Gorrin nodded.

"I'll make it worth yer while. Ye like meat, don't ye?"

The goblin's eyes gleamed.

"Meatsss… yesss… good meatsss."

"Then here's the deal. Every time ye haul my goods to the deep city, I'll bring ye a fat deer leg."

The goblin's sharp fingers twitched with excitement.

"Yesss… yesss! Me doess it! Masssterr is wise, very wise!"

They shook on it, sealing the deal.

From that point on, every time Gorrin gathered the goods, he dropped them at the old tunnel entrance—where the goblin transported them deeper to the Duergar city.

For the next several weeks, Gorrin worked like a machine.

By day, he ran the iron mines as an overseer, keeping his position stable and trusted.

By evening, he bought supplies from the surface markets: Grain from the traders. Dried meats and cheese from the butchers. Ale and spirits from the breweries.

Using silver provided by the Duergar, he secured shipment after shipment.

No one questioned it—after all, plenty of traders moved goods in and out of Dumgral'dur.

The goblin worked as promised, hauling barrels, crates, and sacks of goods into the deep.

And every few nights, Gorrin left a fresh deer leg for his new trade partner.

The Duergar merchants, for their part, were pleased.

Their market thrived, and they continued to honor the trade—providing Gorrin silver and soon, the promise of gold.

But the second part of the contract still loomed.

200 pounds of rare ore.

So, at night, when the city above slept, Gorrin descended into the Deep Mines.

The Duergar led him to a cavern, where black-veined stone shimmered with traces of deep-earth minerals.

The ore was harder than iron, but it broke apart in heavy chunks, making the work physically brutal but efficient.

The mining tools provided by the Duergar were different—shaped with strange runes, designed for precision rather than brute force.

At first, the work was slow, but Gorrin was a natural. Swing. Break. Gather. Load. Hour after hour, he worked.

Each night, he chipped away at the stone, filling his quota. His muscles ached. His hands bled. But the ore piled up.

By the end of three grueling weeks, Gorrin stood before the Duergar merchant, his arms crossed, the final load of ore at his feet.

"There. 200 pounds. As agreed."

The merchant looked over the piles of ore, nodding slowly.

"You have honored the contract, surface dwarf. You have worked, traded, and upheld your end. You are not like the others."

Gorrin grinned tiredly.

"Aye. And now, about that sample of gold ye promised."

The Duergar merchant smiled—a rare sight. He reached into a small black chest, pulling out a single, smooth nugget of pure gold. He placed it in Gorrin's palm. The weight was heavy. Real. Solid. *"Hells, this could be the start of something bigger."*

The Duergar leaned forward.

"This is only the beginning. If you wish… there will be more work. More trade. More gold."

Gorrin rolled the nugget between his fingers, thinking. He had fulfilled his contract. He was free to walk away. But deep inside, he knew—he wasn't done yet.

Gorrin had built something most dwarves never dreamed of—a secret golden trade route running between the surface and the depths.

And it was making him richer by the day.

Every week, he moved goods from the surface down to the Duergar, and every week, he got paid in silver and gold—quadruple what the same goods would fetch in Dumgral'dur.

No taxes. No competition. No oversight.

Just profit.

And he intended to keep it that way.

Each morning, after his overseer duties, Gorrin would hit the merchant district, checking in with his trusted suppliers.

He kept things casual, never buying from the same stall too often, never drawing too much attention.

At the butcher's, he picked up cured venison, smoked pork, and dried sausage—meats that would last in the tunnels.

"Back again, Stonefist? Ye must have a whole clan to feed."

Gorrin grinned, sliding over a pouch of silver.

"Somethin' like that. Just keep it comin'."

At the grain merchant's, he secured sacks of barley, oats, and dried wheat, easy to store and perfect for brewing.

With his cart stacked high, he made the final stop—the alehouse.

Here, he made sure to get the finest barrels of strong dwarven brew.

"Special delivery again?" the brewer smiled, rolling the barrels onto Gorrin's cart.

"Aye. Got some fine customers who appreciate the good stuff."

They had no idea who he was selling to.

And that's how he wanted it.

As night fell, Gorrin maneuvered his loaded cart through the quieter streets, slipping down to the hidden tunnel entrance.

Like always, the goblin was waiting, eyes gleaming, fingers twitching in anticipation.

"Ahhh, masssterr brings the goodss again!"

Gorrin hopped down, patting the side of the cart.

"Aye. Same deal. Get this to the Duergar, and ye'll get yer meat."

The goblin licked its cracked lips, nodding furiously.

"Meat, yesss. Good meatsss. Me brings the goods, the deep dwarvesss are pleased."

He moved with shocking efficiency, despite his size—loading the barrels, crates, and sacks onto a rickety handcart of his own.

Then, with a final crooked grin, he vanished into the dark tunnels, hauling the cargo into the depths.

Gorrin watched him go, arms crossed.

He wasn’t sure if he should trust the little creature.

But so far, the goblin had kept its word.

And as long as the deer legs kept coming, the goblin wasn’t complaining.

Far beneath the mountain, in the heart of the Duergar city, the trade flourished.

At first, the dark dwarves were skeptical.

They had long forgotten the taste of surface food, surface ale, surface luxuries.

But once they got a taste… they craved more.

The first barrels of ale were cracked open in their underground taverns—thick, dark dwarven brews, strong enough to bring warmth even to the black-skinned deep-dwellers.

The first Duergar to try it took a long gulp, smacking his lips.

Then, after a long pause…

"By the Hollow Veins… this is strong."

Another Duergar downed a mug, then another. Soon, the barrels were empty. More surface goods flooded into the market. The meats were rich, flavorful, unlike the stringy creatures they hunted in the Deep.

The grain gave them bread, something they had long abandoned. For every shipment, the Duergar paid Gorrin quadruple the surface price. Every run earned him 1000 silver—and sometimes, a few nuggets of gold as a bonus. The pouches of wealth grew heavy. Gorrin was becoming a rich man. And as he sat in his cozy stone house, counting his coin by lanternlight, a satisfied grin spread across his face.

"Aye… this is only the beginnin’."

He had struck gold—and no one knew about it.

And he intended to keep it that way.

Gorrin sat in his dimly lit home, the flickering lantern casting long shadows across the piles of silver and gold stacked atop his oak table.

Trade was booming.

The Duergar were hungry for more goods, and he couldn’t keep up alone.

"Time to expand."

Gorrin needed hands he could trust, workers who wouldn't ask too many questions.

So he sought out four dwarves, men who were used to hard labor but weren't tied to guild contracts or noble houses.

He found them in the rougher parts of Dumgral'dur—miners looking for extra coin, traders eager for work, and a couple of old caravan hands who knew how to keep their mouths shut.

He gathered them in a quiet backroom of a tavern, the flickering candlelight giving the place a secretive air.

"Right, lads. I got a job fer ye. Pays ten silver a week."

That got their attention.

"No risk, no danger—just shoppin' and movin' goods. Ye buy from the usual merchants in town, but never too much from the same seller. Ye bring the crates to the mines at night, leave 'em at a drop spot. That's it."

One dwarf, a burly fellow with a scar across his nose, leaned forward.

"Ain't askin' what's in the crates?"

Gorrin smiled.

"Ye're gettin' paid to carry, not to ask. But I'll tell ye this—it's all legal, just not exactly… taxed."

The dwarves chuckled.

"Fair enough. Ye pay in silver, right? None o' that scribbled nonsense?"

"Silver. Upfront. Every week."

They shook hands, and just like that, Gorrin had his surface team.

With the increased trade, the goblin needed help.

One night, as Gorrin dropped off the latest shipment at the mine entrance, he spoke to the scrawny little creature.

"Ye got any kin in these tunnels, rat? If I give ye more work, can ye handle it?"

The goblin blinked, then grinned, revealing his jagged teeth.

"Ohhh… masssterr wantsss more hands? Yesss… me hasss many brothers in the tunnels. Many who hunger."

A few nights later, the goblin returned—not alone.

Five more crooked, lanky goblins slithered out of the darkness, their black eyes gleaming hungrily.

They hissed, whispered among themselves, clawed fingers twitching.

Gorrin crossed his arms.

"Ye work for me, same deal. Ye haul the goods to the Duergar, ye get yer deer legs. No messin' about, no nonsense."

The goblins nodded vigorously, eyes shining at the mention of meat.

One of them, slightly bigger than the others, croaked, "Meatsss… many meatsss!"

Gorrin chuckled.

"Aye. Many meats. But only if ye do the work."

With six goblins now moving shipments, the operation became larger, faster, smoother.

The hired dwarves bought the goods during the day, delivered them to the mines at night.

The goblins hauled the supplies into the Deep.

And Gorrin?

He simply collected the profits.

For the next month, everything ran flawlessly. Five shipments made it safely to the Duergar city. 500 gold paid in solid nuggets. No interruptions. No mistakes.

The Duergar were more than satisfied.

In their deep taverns, they drank the rich surface ale, savoring the strong dwarven brew.

One grizzled duergar, after his third mug, leaned back with a deep sigh.

"By the Hollow Veins… this is better than anything we've ever made down here."

Another merchant, gnawing on a dried sausage, grunted in agreement.

"Aye. And that surface cheese? Makes even our toughest rations taste like a feast."

Gorrin had done more than trade—he had revived something forgotten.

The Duergar, who had long abandoned surface luxuries, were now addicted to them.

And they were paying Gorrin a fortune for it.

With his gold reserves growing, Gorrin knew it was time to start living like the merchant he had become.

He visited the tailors in the Merchant’s District, ordering clothes fit for a noble.

Gone were the simple tunics and rough trousers.

He now wore pure silk shirts, dyed in deep crimson and midnight black. A finely tailored vest, lined with silver threading. New boots of polished leather, sturdy but elegant. A silver necklace, a sign of wealth among traders. Golden rings, one on each hand—subtle, but undeniable.

The next step?

A new house. Gorrin scouted properties in the Noble District, eyeing a fine stone manor with a spacious inner courtyard. He wasn’t ready to buy just yet—but soon.

Very soon.

Every night, Gorrin dined at the Black Swan, taking a private table near the hearth.

His meals were lavish, a far cry from the simple miner’s rations he once ate. Roasted lamb, basted in thick gravy. Buttered potatoes, seasoned with herbs from the highlands. Thick slabs of cheese, paired with honey and dried fruit. Dark dwarven wine, aged in deep casks, smooth as silk.

The Black Swan’s owner, Brumli Kegbeard, took notice.

One night, as Gorrin leaned back after finishing his meal, Brumli approached, wiping his hands on his apron.

"Ye’ve been eatin’ like a king lately, Stonefist. Can’t help but notice yer pockets seem heavier these days."

Gorrin smiled, sipping his wine.

"Trade is good, Brumli. Very good."

Brumli chuckled, shaking his head.

"Whatever ye’re doin’, it’s workin’. Ain’t seen a miner turn merchant this fast in all my years."

Gorrin raised his glass.

"Some of us know how to find the right stones, my friend. And the right buyers."

Brumli laughed, clapping him on the shoulder.

"Just don’t forget the little folk when ye get too rich, aye?"

Gorrin grinned.

"Aye. That’s the trick, Brumli. If I do this right, I’ll never have to work another day in my life."

And as he sipped his wine, feeling the weight of gold in his purse

The Black Swan’s warm glow cast long shadows across the wooden floors as Gorrin leaned back in his chair, savoring a sip of fine dwarven brandy.

His new silk tunic felt smooth against his skin, and his golden rings gleamed under the flickering lanternlight.

Life had changed.

He was no longer just a miner.

No longer just an overseer.

He was a merchant now—a rich one.

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And that drew attention.

The heavy thud of boots on the wooden floor made Gorrin glance up.

Ordrik Ironbrand, Guildmaster of the Mining Guild, was making his way toward him.

A broad-shouldered, grey-bearded dwarf with thick arms, Ordrik had been running the guild long before Gorrin even swung his first pickaxe.

And tonight, he looked curious… maybe even suspicious.

He stopped at Gorrin’s table, eyes narrowing at the silk clothing, the necklace, the golden rings.

"Well now… Gorrin Stonefist. What in the Stonefather’s name has gotten into ye?"

Gorrin smiled, setting his brandy down.

"Aye, Guildmaster. Good evenin' to ye. What brings ye to my table?"

Ordrik didn't sit just yet.

He crossed his thick arms, staring Gorrin down.

"Didn't expect to see a mine overseer dressed like a nobleman, that's all. Ye've been livin' well, Stonefist. Mighty well."

Gorrin kept his expression neutral, but he felt the weight of the old dwarf's stare.

"Hard work pays, Ordrik. I still do my duty in the mines. But I've been makin' good investments on the side."

"Investments, eh?" Ordrik finally pulled out a chair, sitting down. "Ye always struck me as a man with his hands in the stone, not in trade."

Gorrin chuckled.

"Aye, well. A dwarf can't swing a pickaxe forever. Best to put some coin to work before the back gives out."

Ordrik nodded slowly, but his eyes still gleamed with suspicion.

"Ye must be makin' a damn fortune on those… 'investments.' Didn't think mine overseers made enough to buy up noble houses."

Gorrin took another sip of brandy, shrugging.

"Aye, well. Right traders, right deals, right time. That's all it takes."

Ordrik grunted.

"Hmph. Suppose so. Just seems… strange. A miner's life is hard. Always has been. But ye? Yer drinkin' fine liquor, wearin' gold, livin' in a fine house. A bit odd, don't ye think?"

Gorrin smiled, but there was a sharpness behind it.

"Aye. It is odd. Odd how some dwarves know how to grab the right opportunities and others just watch 'em pass by."

Ordrik narrowed his eyes, opening his mouth to say something else—

But then, the doors of the Black Swan swung open once more.

And in walked Belfram Coinpurse, Head Tax Officer of Dumgral'dur.

The tavern grew quieter as Belfram stepped inside.

A dwarf of noble blood, dressed in a fine black tunic with silver embroidery, he was as rich as he was dangerous.

His family had controlled tax and trade laws in Dumgral'dur for generations, and no merchant, no trader, no craftsman could avoid his influence.

With calculated steps, he strode toward Ordrik's table, noticing Gorrin sitting there.

"Guildmaster Ironbrand. Didn't expect to find ye here."

Belfram's eyes flicked briefly to Gorrin, as if assessing him.

Ordrik immediately shifted gears.

Whatever suspicions he had about Gorrin, he didn't want to discuss them in front of the city's tax officer.

"Ah, Belfram. Join us. We were just talkin' about trade… and trade."

Belfram sat down smoothly, adjusting the silver rings on his fingers.

"Trade, eh? Now that's a fine subject. Especially since taxes have been… growing."

Gorrin kept his face unreadable, though he felt a slight tension in his gut.

If anyone could sniff out his secret operations, it was Belfram Coinpurse.

Ordrik, keen to shift the conversation away from Gorrin's wealth, spoke first.

"Aye. The tax system's been a pain lately. Workers complain about their wages gettin' cut down by levies. Trade's been sufferin' too."

Belfram waved a hand dismissively.

"Bah. That's how a city grows. Taxes keep the roads built, the forges runnin', the guards paid. Without 'em, Dumgral'dur would crumble."

Gorrin, taking the chance to steer the conversation, leaned in.

"Aye, but some say the coin don't always flow where it should. Seems to me the nobles eat well while the miners scrape by."

Belfram arched a brow.

"A bold thing to say, Stonefist. Ye got a stake in the merchant trade, do ye?"

Gorrin grinned, tapping his golden ring against his mug.

"Aye. And a merchant knows when a coin is spent well… and when it's wasted."

Ordrik, seeing a chance to press Belfram on tax burdens, joined in.

"Truth be told, Belfram, the taxes on the mining guild have been pressin' harder. If trade is sufferin', production's sufferin' too. We can't afford delays."

Belfram sighed, leaning back.

"Then perhaps the Guild needs to adapt. Expand. Look for better avenues of profit. That's what traders do. That's what nobles do. Perhaps it's time the guildmasters stop thinkin' like pickaxe swingers and more like merchants."

Ordrik grumbled under his breath.

Gorrin hid a smile.

If only Belfram knew—he already had.

The conversation shifted to general city affairs—ore production, trade relations, upcoming levies.

All the while, Gorrin remained calm, composed, careful.

His wealth was growing.

His network was secure.

And as long as no one got too curious, his gold pit would remain his own little secret.

The air in the deep tunnels was thick with dust and the scent of earth, the faint glow of lanterns flickering across the stone walls as Gorrin made his usual nightly rounds.

The operation was running smoothly—his hired dwarves were moving crates, stacking them near the hidden entrance where the goblins would haul them deeper.

Kegs of ale sat in neat rows, grain sacks were stacked, and bundles of furs and pelts were lashed together for transport.

Gorrin nodded in satisfaction.

"Keep it movin', lads. We don't have all night."

One of his workers, a broad-shouldered dwarf named Dorrik, grunted as he hoisted a sack onto his back.

"Aye, aye. But this is the last load, right? Goblins should be pickin' up soon."

Gorrin was about to respond—

When he heard the sound of heavy boots approaching.

His stomach tightened.

The dwarves froze in place, eyes darting toward the tunnel entrance as a familiar figure stepped into the dim light.

Guildmaster Ordrik Ironbrand.

And the moment he saw the crates, the kegs, the furs—his eyes narrowed.

"What in the Stonefather's name is this?"

Ordrik's voice boomed through the tunnel, his thick brow furrowing as he took in the scene.

Gorrin felt his jaw tighten, stepping forward with an easy grin.

"Ah, Guildmaster. Just some… provisions for the lads. Hard workin' miners need food, don't they? Ale too, puts out the thirst."

Ordrik grunted, stepping closer.

His keen eyes swept over the supplies—and then stopped at a stack of grain sacks.

He took a step toward them, nudging one with his boot.

"Food for the lads, eh? What now, Stonefist? Are the workers chewin' on grain these days? Or maybe they're bakin' bread in the mineshafts?"

Gorrin forced a chuckle.

"Well, ye know how it is. Good to have a mix of rations. Keeps 'em strong."

Ordrik's face darkened.

"Enough with the dung. I know a trade operation when I see one."

The workers stood silent, waiting to see how Gorrin would respond.

Gorrin exhaled slowly.

"Damn it. Not talkin' my way out of this one."

He lowered his voice, stepping closer.

"Alright, fine. I'll tell ye—but this stays between us."

Ordrik crossed his arms.

"I'm listenin'."

Gorrin kept his explanation vague, just enough to satisfy Ordrik's curiosity without revealing the full extent of his wealth.

"A while back, I found a collapsed tunnel. Dug through, found some deep-dwellers—Duergar, if ye can believe it. Been livin' in the dark for gods-know-how-long."

Ordrik's eyes widened slightly.

"Duergar? By the Deep, I thought they were long gone."

"Aye, so did I. But turns out, they ain't just survivin'—they're thrivin'. And they're desperate for surface goods."

Ordrik glanced at the stacks of cargo again.

"And what are ye gettin' in return?"

Gorrin shrugged.

"A bit o' silver. Some gold. Nothin' grand, but it's a fair deal."

Ordrik rubbed his beard, thinking.

"A fair deal, eh? Then why in the hells did ye keep it secret? Why not bring this to the Mining Guild? This could be… interestin'."

Gorrin shook his head firmly.

"Because it ain't safe. These tunnels are full of dangers, and the Duergar ain't exactly the friendliest folk. I've barely managed to keep things peaceful. If too many of our kind start pokin' about, it could turn ugly."

Ordrik stared at him for a long moment.

Then, finally, he sighed and nodded.

"Aye. I see it now. But I also see somethin' else."

Gorrin raised an eyebrow.

"What's that?"

Ordrik leaned in slightly, his expression hard.

"Ye need to start sharin' the profits."

Gorrin felt his jaw clench.

"Ye want a cut?"

Ordrik grinned.

"Aye. And I ain’t the only one who’ll need convincin’."

He tapped his fingers on the crates, shaking his head.

"Belfram Coinpurse is a nosy bastard. If word of this trade reaches him, he’ll sniff ye out faster than a hound on a roast."

Gorrin sighed heavily.

"How much?"

Ordrik’s grin widened.

"Fifty gold for me. Fifty for Belfram. Equal shares. Fair deal, right?"

Gorrin forced himself to nod.

"Fair deal."

He reached into his coin pouch, pulled out the gold, and handed over the bribe.

Ordrik weighed the heavy pouches in his hands, satisfied.

"Smart move, Stonefist. Smart move."

Ordrik, now feeling bolder, stroked his beard.

"Y’know, I should come down there with ye. See this Duergar city for myself."

Gorrin’s stomach twisted.

That was the last thing he needed.

"Not a good idea."

Ordrik scoffed.

"What, ye think I can’t handle it? I ain’t some green-bearded whelp. If ye can go, I can go."

Gorrin shook his head.

"It ain’t that. The tunnels are dangerous. The Duergar barely tolerate me. If ye come along, it could ruin the whole deal."

Ordrik’s eyes narrowed, unconvinced.

"Bah, I can—"

At that moment, a goblin's head suddenly peeked out from behind a stack of crates.

It's beady black eyes blinked, and with a quick, gnarled hand, it grabbed a crate and scurried back into the shadows.

Ordrik's face went pale.

He stood as a pillar hit by lightning, hand reaching for his belt dagger.

"WHAT IN THE NAME OF THE STONEFATHER—?!"

The goblin was gone.

Gorrin bit back a laugh.

"Ah… aye. I forgot to mention. I got goblin haulers."

Ordrik slowly sat back down, eyes still fixed on the shadows.

"That… was a goblin."

"Aye. Hard workers, too."

Ordrik exhaled sharply.

"Right. Right. I think I've seen enough. Maybe ye're right. Maybe I best leave this to ye."

Gorrin grinned.

"Aye, best not risk it, eh?"

Ordrik scratched his beard

"Aye… best not."

Gorrin smiled, leaning back.

For now, the secret was safe.

Even if it cost him hundred a gold a month to keep it that way.

Gorrin sat at his desk, running his fingers through a pile of gold coins, the flickering lanternlight making them gleam in the dim room.

His operation was thriving.

The Duergar city was vast—nearly 8000 strong—and their hunger for surface goods kept growing.

What had started as a small side hustle had become a full-scale underground trade empire.

But demand was outpacing supply.

"Time to expand."

And he knew exactly where to start.

The cart rumbled over the dirt road as Gorrin steered his horse toward Stonebrook.

The air was crisp, the scent of pine and fresh earth drifting from the nearby forest.

The moment he entered the village, he spotted Bolin and Harvin near the mill, loading grain sacks onto a wagon.

"Oi! Bolin! Harvin! Get over here!"

The two dwarves turned, wiping sweat from their brows.

Bolin grinned.

"Hah! Well, if it ain't the merchant king himself! What brings ye back to Stonebrook? Ye come to drink our ale dry?"

Gorrin chuckled, hopping down from his cart.

"Aye, I'll take a barrel—but I got somethin' else in mind. I got work for ye."

Harvin raised an eyebrow.

"Work? Thought ye were runnin' some fancy trade in the city."

"Aye, and it's growin' faster than I can handle. I need men I can trust."

Bolin crossed his arms.

"Alright, speak then. What kind o' work?"

Gorrin laid it out plain. 15 silver per week to shop for supplies on the surface. They could also bring their own village goods—grain, dried fish, wool, pelts, smoked meats—and get paid extra for them. Deliver the crates to the mines at night, no questions asked.

Harvin scratched his beard.

"Fifteen silver a week? That's more than I make in a month."

Bolin nodded slowly.

"And ye'll buy our village goods too? That's a fine deal, Gorrin. Real fine."

"Aye, better than fine. It's a chance to make real coin. So, ye in?"

Bolin and Harvin exchanged a glance, then both grinned.

"Aye, we're in."

"Good. And I need two more. Any men in the village lookin' for coin?"

Harvin smiled.

"Aye, I know a couple lads who'd leap at this. Give me a day, I'll bring 'em in."

Gorrin clapped his hands together.

"Then it's done. Welcome to the trade, boys."

Back in the deep tunnels, Gorrin met with his most trusted goblin—the first one to ever work for him.

And now, it was time to give the little bastard a name.

"Oi, rat. Been thinkin'—if we're workin' together, ye need a proper name."

The goblin tilted his head.

"Masssterr givess me name?"

Gorrin grinned.

"Aye. Snaggit. Suits ye."

The goblin's black eyes gleamed with pride.

"Snaggit. Yessss. Massster is wise. Me likesss it."

Then, Snaggit leaned closer, his voice lowering to a whisper.

"Massster wantss more workers? Me hasss more brothersss."

Gorrin arched an eyebrow.

"How many?"

Snaggit grinned, baring his sharp, crooked teeth.

"As many as massster needsss. But they need meatsss. Lots of meatsss."

Gorrin smiled.

"Done. Bring 'em in."

With Stonebrook providing goods and Snaggit bringing in more goblin haulers, the entire trade network expanded overnight. The new dwarven workers bought food, ale, timber, and supplies in Dumgral'dur and brought the shipments to the mines at night. The goblins carried the crates through the hidden tunnels, delivering them to the eager Duergar market.

And the Duergar?

They were paying more than ever.

Now, Gorrin was pulling in 1000 gold per month.

Of course, Ordrik Ironbrand and Belfram Coinpurse still needed their cut.

Once a month, Gorrin met them in a quiet chamber beneath the Guildhall, sliding two pouches across the table.

"Fifty gold for ye, Ordrik. And fifty for Belfram."

Ordrik weighed the pouch in his thick hands, nodding.

"Hah! Ye do good work, Stonefist. I daresay ye were wasted as a miner."

Belfram smiled thinly, his sharp eyes gleaming as he ran his fingers over the coins.

"As long as the gold flows, we have no quarrel. But I trust that ye're keeping things… discreet."

Gorrin smiled.

"Aye, I got it under control. No one knows a damn thing."

Belfram sipped his wine.

"Let's keep it that way."

With pouches heavy with gold, Gorrin began to live like the nobleman he had become.

His fine stone manor in the Noble District was now fully furnished with dark oak tables, velvet chairs, and chandeliers of iron and crystal. He wore tailored silk tunics, golden rings, and a silver-buckled belt. He dined daily at the Black Swan, drinking the finest wine, eating the richest meats.

Brumli Kegbeard, the tavern keeper, noticed.

"Hah! Ye're becomin' a damned prince, Gorrin! What's next, ye gonna buy yerself a noble title?"

Gorrin laughed, clinking his mug against Brumli's.

"Hells, if the price is right, maybe I will!"

With eight dwarves working the surface,

A dozen goblins moving cargo in the deep,

And 8000 Duergar hungry for surface goods…

Gorrin had built a hidden trade empire.

And the gold?

It kept flowing.

And as long as no one asked the wrong questions…

He'd keep getting richer.

Enemies within

The Mining Guild's chambers were carved deep within the city's stone heart, their massive iron doors etched with ancient runes of mining and wealth.

Gorrin strode in, his golden rings glinting under the torchlight.

Ordrik sat at the long stone table, a half-empty tankard beside him, his thick arms crossed over his chest.

The moment Gorrin sat down, Ordrik wasted no time.

"Yer makin' more than ye let on, Stonefist."

Gorrin kept his face neutral.

"Oh? And what makes ye say that?"

Ordrik snorted.

"Don't play dumb. I got ears in the city. Yer network's growin', yer pockets are heavier, and I ain't blind to the number of carts goin' in and out of Dumgral'dur."

He leaned forward, eyes narrowing.

"I want a bigger cut. 150 gold a month."

Gorrin's stomach twisted.

He had expected Ordrik to be greedy, but not this greedy.

"Ye already get fifty. And Belfram gets his share too. That's more than fair."

Ordrik slammed his fist on the table, making Gorrin's brandy slosh.

"Fair?! Ye'd be nothin' without the Guild turnin' a blind eye! Ye want to keep yer little empire? Then ye pay what it's worth."

Gorrin's jaw tightened.

He took a slow breath, weighing his words.

"And what if I say no?"

Ordrik grinned—but there was no humor in it.

"Then the Guild'll start askin' questions. And ye don't want that."

Gorrin knew what that meant. Ordrik wasn't just a miner. He was a Guildmaster. And a Guildmaster could make life very difficult. He could start investigations. Close tunnels. Seize trade routes. Block deals. Gorrin needed a way out. And that way had already come knocking.

Gorrin had got an anonymous invitation to visit a nobleman Haldor Goldwell.

The Goldwell estate was magnificent, even by noble standards.

A vast stone hall, lined with gold-trimmed banners, each one displaying the sigil of his house —a golden hammer striking an anvil.

Lord Haldor Goldwell sat in his high-backed chair, sipping a glass of red elven wine.

When Gorrin entered, the noble dwarf looked up, his sharp, calculating eyes studying him.

"Ah, Stonefist. So, ye've come to talk."

Gorrin smiled, taking a seat across from him.

"Aye. Ye got an offer. I'm listenin'."

Goldwell leaned forward, resting his hands on the table.

"I know about yer dealings with the Duergar."

Gorrin kept his face unreadable.

Goldwell continued.

"Yer supplyin' them with surface goods. Food, ale, timber. And they're payin' ye handsomely in gold."

He paused, swirling his wine.

"I want in."

Gorrin raised an eyebrow.

"Oh? And what's in it for me?"

Goldwell's lips curled into a slow smile.

"A title. Land. Nobility."

Gorrin's pulse quickened.

"A noble title?"

"Aye. I got influence in the Council. Ye make sure my trade interests are secure with the Duergar—ensure I get my share of goods and coin—and I'll see that ye're raised to nobility. No more overseer. No more merchant. Ye'll be Lord Gorrin Stonefist."

Gorrin let the words settle. A noble title meant real power. No more answering to the Guild. No more bribes. He could own land. Build a real estate empire. Have a name that carried weight.

But it would also mean betraying Ordrik. The Guild would turn on him. He would make a powerful enemy. He took a slow sip of his own drink. Then he grinned. "Ye got yerself a deal."

That night, Gorrin sat in his study, staring at the documents in front of him.

The official papers securing his noble title were being drawn up.

The contract with Goldwell was signed.

And his alliance with the Mining Guild? Over.

"I didn't claw my way up from the stone to keep handin' coin to bastards who think they own me."

"Ordrik wants more? A bigger cut? Bah. He's already gettin' fifty gold a month for doin' nothin'."

"But a noble title… that changes everything."

"I've been buildin' an empire in the dark. Time to bring it to the light."

He gritted his teeth and took a deep swig of his brandy.

"I'll take the title. And if Ordrik don't like it? He can shove his pickaxe up his arse."

"This is the next step. The next play. I was never meant to be just a miner."

"The Guild thinks they can bleed me dry? Bah. I'll carve my own path."

"Let Ordrik try to stop me. Let the Guild grumble. They won't touch a nobleman."

A new future awaited him.

And soon, all of Dumgral'dur would know the name Lord Gorrin Stonefist.

The damp air of the mines pressed heavily against the stone walls, the flickering lanterns casting long, jagged shadows across the tunnels.

Gorrin stood firm, his arms crossed, his gold-trimmed cloak barely swaying in the underground breeze.

Across from him, Ordrik Ironbrand, Mining Guild's Guildmaster, scowled, his thick fingers twitching at his belt as if itching for a hammer.

The tension was thicker than the iron dust in the air.

And then Ordrik spoke, his voice a low growl.

"Ye made a mistake, Stonefist. A big one."

Gorrin arched an eyebrow, keeping his tone even.

"That so? Enlighten me, Ordrik."

Ordrik's nostrils flared.

"Ye think a noble title protects ye? That it makes ye untouchable? Bah. Ye forgot who really runs this mountain."

He stepped forward, jabbing a calloused finger at Gorrin's chest.

"Ye think the king won't care that ye've opened a trade route with the Duergar? That ye're stuffin' their bellies with our food, givin' 'em access to our goods? He don't even know they're down there! But he'll know soon enough."

Gorrin's jaw tightened.

"Ye wouldn't dare."

Ordrik's eyes gleamed with dark satisfaction.

"Oh, I would. And what do ye think he'll do when he finds out? He'll send his warriors down into those tunnels and purge 'em."

Gorrin felt his fists clench.

He had worked too hard to let this trade route collapse.

The Duergar trade was making him a fortune.

If the king found out?

Everything would be burned to the ground.

"And if the king don't listen?" Gorrin challenged, voice calm but edged with steel.

Ordrik grinned.

"Then I'll make sure ye don't have a foothold in these mines no more. Ye think yer noble title means anythin' down here? I can have ye dismissed as overseer before the sun sets. No more access to the mines. No more Duergar. No more trade."

The veins in Gorrin's neck pulsed.

This bastard was backing him into a corner.

Ordrik saw the fury in Gorrin's face and smiled.

"What now, Stonefist? Ye gonna fight me? Kill me? Ye ain't got the spine."

Gorrin took one slow breath, steadying himself.

And then—

A small movement behind the old mine's entrance.

A pair of beady black eyes.

Snaggit.

The goblin had been watching. Listening.

And the moment Ordrik's words turned to true threat…

Snaggit launched from the shadows.

The air exploded with motion.

Before Gorrin could even react, Snaggit shot out from behind the mine wall, a blur of wiry muscle, sharp claws, and jagged teeth.

Ordrik barely had time to gasp—

Before Snaggit's gnarled fingers latched onto his throat.

A horrific wet rip.

Ordrik’s windpipe tore clean from his neck, blood spraying across the cavern wall.

He staggered backward, eyes wide with shock and pain, his mouth opening in a desperate, voiceless scream.

Then he collapsed onto the ground, his body twitching for a few moments before finally going still.

Silence.

Heavy. Absolute.

Gorrin stood motionless, his chest rising and falling, his heart pounding like a war drum.

Snaggit crouched over Ordrik’s lifeless corpse, blood dripping from his claws, his sharp teeth bared.

The goblin looked up at Gorrin, his voice a guttural croak.

"A fightsss… thisss man wanted to attackss the master… now man dead… no threat to the master."

Gorrin’s eyes widened.

He looked down at Ordrik’s body.

At the pool of blood seeping into the stone floor.

At the lifeless stare frozen in Ordrik’s dead eyes.

A guildmaster. A powerful dwarf.

Dead.

And not by his hand.

But his problem nonetheless.

Gorrin ran a hand down his face, exhaling.

"By the gods, Snaggit… what did ye do?"

The goblin blinked.

"Protected massster. He wasss bad dwarf. Made angry noisseesss. Bad dwarf. ..Dead dwarfff."

Gorrin’s mind raced. This was dangerous. More dangerous than anything before. Ordrik had powerful allies. If his death was discovered, there would be questions. An investigation. He had to think fast. What to do next? How to cover this up? His trade empire depended on it.

Gorrin stood frozen, his mind racing as warm blood pooled beneath Ordrik’s lifeless body.

Snaggit crouched next to the corpse, licking his fingers, his sharp black eyes darting up at Gorrin with an innocent expression, as if waiting for approval.

Then—

Footsteps.

A familiar voice.

"Oi, Gorrin! We’re bringin’ in the last—"

Bolin and Harvin rounded the corner, each carrying crates of ale—only to freeze in their tracks, eyes locking onto the scene before them.

A dead Guildmaster.

A blood-covered goblin.

And Gorrin, standing there like a dwarf caught in an avalanche.

Bolin’s mouth opened, but no words came.

Harvin blinked hard, rubbing his eyes like he was hoping it was a hallucination.

Then, Bolin finally managed to speak.

"By the gods, Gorrin… what in the deep hells did ye do?"

Gorrin snapped back into the present, his mind shifting into survival mode.

"Listen to me, and listen well. Load him onto a wagon. Take him to Stonebrook. Bury him in the graveyard."

Bolin and Harvin exchanged a look of pure disbelief.

"Ye want us to—"

"Do as I say, now! No one’s seen us, no one knows he’s dead. If ye keep yer mouths shut, this whole thing disappears."

Harvin ran a hand down his face, shaking his head.

"This is madness… if we get caught—"

Gorrin cut him off.

"Ye won’t get caught. And for yer silence, ye’ll both get twenty gold each. More gold than ye’ve seen in one night."

That made them pause.

Twenty gold was more than a year’s wages in Stonebrook.

Bolin sighed heavily, glancing at the lifeless Ordrik.

"Dammit, Gorrin… ye always get us into the deep muck."

Harvin muttered a curse but finally nodded.

"Fine. But if we go down for this, I’m hauntin’ ye in the afterlife."

The wagon rumbled along the dark road, covered in thick wool blankets to hide its grim cargo.

Bolin and Harvin sat silently, gripping the reins, the only sound being the creaking of wood and the occasional hoot of an owl.

They reached Stonebrook under the cover of darkness, passing the quiet homes of sleeping villagers.

No one was awake.

No one saw them.

The graveyard lay at the far end of the village, the rows of simple stone markers bathed in moonlight.

"Right then, let’s get this over with," Bolin muttered, grabbing a shovel.

Harvin yanked the blankets back, revealing Ordrik’s lifeless face, now pale and rigid with death.

"Ye were an arse, Ordrik. But here’s yer restin’ place," Harvin murmured before heaving the first shovel of dirt.

They dug deep, their muscles burning, sweat dripping from their brows.

By the time they lowered Ordrik into the grave, their hands were blistered, their backs aching.

"Well, he ain’t complainin’ anymore," Bolin said as he shoveled the last layer of dirt over the grave.

Harvin patted the ground down, leaving no sign of disturbance.

"No marker?"

"No marker. No name. No one finds him."

They stood for a long moment, staring at the nameless grave.

Then, without another word, they turned and rode back toward Dumgral'dur—20 gold richer, but burdened with a secret that could never be spoken.

By morning, the city was buzzing with whispers.

Ordrik Ironbrand was missing.

Guild members noticed his absence immediately, and rumors spread like wildfire.

Some said he had gone off to negotiate a new mining contract. Others whispered he had fled the city, fearing scandal. No one had any evidence of foul play. No one suspected Gorrin. But the Mining Guild needed a new leader. And that opened a door of opportunity.

Gorrin wasted no time. As days passed and with Ordrik out of the picture, the Mining Guild Council had to elect a new Guildmaster.

And Gorrin made sure his name was at the top of the list.

At a private gathering of Dumgral'dur's nobility, he met with Lord Haldor Goldwell and his closest allies.

Goldwell raised an eyebrow as Gorrin entered, dressed in his finest silk tunic, his golden rings glinting in the candlelight.

"Ah, Lord Stonefist. I hear the Mining Guild is leaderless. A tragic event."

Gorrin gave a knowing smile.

"Aye. A real shame. But the mines need stability. Trade needs stability. And I happen to be the right dwarf to provide that."

Goldwell leaned back, sipping his wine.

"I assume ye're askin' for support."

Gorrin nodded.

"Aye. Back me for Guildmaster, and I'll make sure the Mining Guild serves noble interests. No more stubborn miners fightin' noble coin. We'll work together."

Goldwell's eyes gleamed with satisfaction.

"That's what I like to hear. Very well, Lord Stonefist. Ye'll have my backing—and that of my allies."

In the grand stone chamber of the Mining Guild Hall, the council gathered.

The room was packed with dwarves—guild members, miners, and representatives from noble houses.

A senior councilor stood at the head of the table.

"With Ordrik Ironbrand gone, we must elect a new Guildmaster. We have two candidates: Thrain Hammerfall, a long-standing Guild member… and Gorrin Stonefist."

Thrain was an older dwarf, respected but rigid, unwilling to adapt to new trade routes.

Gorrin, on the other hand, had experience, wealth, and noble backing.

A heated debate followed.

Some miners argued for Thrain, saying Gorrin was more merchant than miner.

But then Lord Goldwell spoke.

"Gorrin has proven himself. He knows trade, knows the mines, and has overseen some of the most profitable operations in recent years. If ye want progress, ye want him."

Other noble-backed voices joined in. One by one, the votes were cast.

And in the end… Gorrin Stonefist was elected Guildmaster.

As Gorrin stood before the Guild, accepting his new position, he felt a wave of satisfaction. Ordrik had tried to control him. Had threatened him. Now, he was buried in an unmarked grave. And Gorrin sat in his place. His trade empire was stronger than ever. His control over the Mining Guild was absolute. And with his wealth, influence, and secrets intact… He was unstoppable.

In the Depths

Gorrin leaned back in his chair, a thick, black tar-like ale swirling in his mug, the air thick with the scent of iron, stone, and fire.

The Duergar tavern, Bottom Tar, was dimly lit by glowing ember-lamps, casting red light over the rough stone tables and the low, arched ceiling.

A group of Duergar miners sat across the room, their muscular arms crossed, watching as goblins scurried about, unloading crates of fresh goods.

Gorrin took a deep gulp of his ale, the burning liquid coating his throat like molten rock.

"By the gods, this stuff would put an ox on its arse," he muttered, setting the mug down.

Across from him, Dorn Blackvein, a senior Duergar trader, chuckled, his gray beard twisted into three thick braids.

"Aye, Stonefist. Ye got a strong gut, but I've yet to see a surface dwarf drink two o' these without fallin' under the table."

Gorrin smiled, rubbing his beard.

"That a challenge?"

Dorn grinned.

"Aye, but a challenge I'd bet against."

They both laughed, the heavy clink of mugs echoing off the stone walls.

At the tavern entrance, goblins hurried inside, dragging small handcarts stacked with crates.

A few Duergar traders stood waiting, checking the deliveries.

One of them, a broad-shouldered Duergar named Varkrul, reached into a crate and pulled out a wheel of cheese, sniffing it before grinning.

"Aye, this is the stuff. Ye've done well, Stonefist. The lads've taken a real likin' to yer goods."

Gorrin nodded, pleased.

"Good. That means more gold for both o' us."

Snaggit, standing near the cart, hissed a chuckle, his clawed hands twitching.

"Massterr is clever. Trade grows, gold flows, and goblins get meats. All are happy."

Varkrul grunted.

"Aye, ye goblins have been good haulers. Never thought I'd see the day we'd be thankin' yer kind, but here we are."

Snaggit grinned wider, his jagged teeth flashing.

"We work. We bring. We get meatsss. Simple deal."

Dorn Blackvein watched the exchange with a thoughtful expression.

"Strange times we live in, Stonefist. Surface dwarves doin' trade with deep dwarves. Goblins runnin' trade instead o' runnin' fer their lives."

Gorrin chuckled, swirling his dark ale.

"Aye. Strange times indeed. But profitable ones."

Dorn smiled.

"That they are."

Gorrin knew the truth of it, though.

This entire operation—the gold pouring in, the wagons loaded with goods, the expansion into the deep—was his work.

But Goldwell took the largest cut. Every month, 2000 gold went to the noble's coffers and he got nothing more from it.

Goldwell's resources, contacts, and influence had expanded the trade, yes—but it was Gorrin's trade network, his logistics, his leadership that made it all possible.

And Goldwell did nothing but count his coin.

Gorrin sipped his ale, his mind turning.

"A thousand gold a month ain't bad. More than I ever thought I'd have."

"But why should I be doin' all the work while Goldwell sits in his fancy halls, feasting on the wealth I built?"

He glanced at Snaggit, the little goblin now happily gnawing on a dried piece of venison.

As the night went on, the Duergar traders grew more at ease.

Gorrin had been coming here for months now, and each time, the distrust that once lingered had faded.

Varkrul, now on his third mug of ale, leaned forward.

"Y'know, Stonefist… I'll say somethin' I never thought I'd say about a surface dwarf. You are the only one we trust."

Dorn Blackvein nodded.

"Aye. We ain't fools. We know surface dwarves look down on us. But ye? Ye've never treated us like dirt. Ye do trade fair, ye keep yer word."

Gorrin set his mug down, feeling the weight of the words.

Trust.

That was rare among dwarves of different kin.

But he had earned it.

"I appreciate that, Dorn. Truly. I won't let ye down."

Varkrul raised his mug.

"To Stonefist, then. And to more gold!"

The Duergar roared in agreement, and the mugs clashed together, spilling ale onto the stone tables.

Gorrin grinned.

"More gold, indeed."

Gorrin stood outside Lord Haldor Goldwell's grand estate, adjusting his silk tunic before stepping through the tall iron doors.

The noble's hall was lavish, filled with golden chandeliers, marble floors, and thick velvet curtains that spoke of a lifetime of wealth.

Goldwell sat in his massive oak chair, a ledger open before him, his jewel-adorned fingers flipping through trade records.

He barely glanced up as Gorrin entered.

"Stonefist. What's the matter? Something wrong with the trade routes?"

Gorrin strode up to the table, placing his hands on the smooth polished wood.

"No, routes are fine. Trade is better than ever. We're bringin' in over 3000 gold a month now."

Goldwell nodded, scribbling something in his ledger.

"Aye, I know. And my share of 2000 gold is coming in right on time. Everything is running as it should."

Gorrin leaned in slightly, his tone steady but firm.

"Aye, but let's talk about that share. I've been doin' the work, runnin' the logistics, hirin' the traders, keepin' the Guild in line, makin' sure no one sticks their nose where it don't belong."

Goldwell looked up, finally meeting Gorrin's gaze.

"Aye. And ye've been paid handsomely for it. 1000 gold a month, more than most noble houses bring in from estates. What's yer point?"

Gorrin's jaw tightened.

"My point is, I deserve a bigger share. Ye got nobility behind ye, aye, and some extra resources—but this operation? It's runnin' because o' me. I'm makin' ye rich, Goldwell. Maybe it's time ye returned the favor."

Goldwell smiled, leaning back in his chair.

"I do return the favor, Stonefist. Ye live in the Noble District now. Ye sit at the same tables as lords. Ye got power because of me. If it weren't for me, ye'd still be crawlin' through the mines. That's payment enough."

Gorrin's fingers drummed on the table.

"And that's yer final say, is it?"

Goldwell's expression didn't change.

"Aye. I got expenses, Stonefist. I got lands, houses, retainers to pay. I can't spare a coin."

Gorrin exhaled slowly, masking his frustration with a calm nod.

"I see. That's how it is, then."

Goldwell smiled.

"That's how it is."

Gorrin forced a grin, tapping the table with his knuckles.

"Aye. Well then, I won't waste any more of yer time."

He turned and walked out of the estate, his mind racing.

"Goldwell thinks he's got me in his pocket. Thinks I'll keep workin' for him like some lackey."

"We'll see about that."

The Black Swan was lively, the warm glow of lanterns illuminating the polished stone walls.

Belfram Coinpurse, Dumgral'dur's chief tax officer, sat at their usual table, sipping a rich dwarven brandy when Gorrin approached.

"Stonefist! Always a pleasure. Come, sit."

Gorrin slid into the chair across from him, signaling the tavern maid for two more drinks.

"How's trade, Belfram? The city still bleedin' its traders dry?"

Belfram laughed, swirling his drink.

"Aye, but that’s the way of things. Tax keeps the city runnin’—and keeps me livin’ comfortably."

Gorrin leaned in.

"Speaking of comfort, I been thinkin’. Ye’ve been keepin’ things quiet for me, and I appreciate that. So let’s sweeten the pot. I’ll up yer cut—ye’ll now be gettin’ 100 gold a month."

Belfram’s eyebrows lifted in surprise.

"Hah! Now that’s a fine offer. Ye must be doin’ well, Gorrin."

Gorrin grinned.

"Aye. And I want to keep doin’ well. And keep my friends happy."

Belfram chuckled, raising his glass.

"Then here’s to profitable friendships."

Their mugs clanked together.

As they drank, Belfram leaned forward slightly.

"Ye hear about land prices outside the city? They’re risin’ fast. More nobles are buyin’ up farmland and river plots. Could be a smart investment."

Gorrin stroked his beard.

"Aye? Any plots still available?"

Belfram nodded.

"A few. Not many. If ye want one, best move quick."

Gorrin grinned.

"I’ll take yer advice on that."

The Land Manager’s office was a modest stone building near the city’s financial district, filled with dusty ledgers and thick scrolls of property deeds.

The clerk behind the desk was a thin, balding dwarf with ink-stained fingers.

"Ah, Lord Stonefist! Always good to see a nobleman interested in land. What can I do for ye?"

Gorrin leaned on the counter.

"I hear land prices are climbin'. I want to secure another plot before they get too high. What's available?"

The clerk nodded eagerly, pulling out a map.

"We've got some fine land near the river, fertile ground—perfect for a brewery or tannery expansion. 400 gold."

Gorrin grinned.

"I'll take it."

The clerk scribbled down the deed, sealing it with the city's official crest.

Another piece of the empire secured.

Later that evening, Gorrin met with one of his biggest suppliers, Ogrik Barrelfoot, a grain merchant with a belly as round as an ale keg.

They sat at a stall in the market, the smell of fresh bread and roasted meats filling the air.

"Gorrin, lad, ye been buyin' from me for months now. What brings ye here?"

Gorrin leaned forward, smiling.

"I want a better price. We're buyin' in bulk now. More than ever. Time to lower them costs."

Ogrik rubbed his chin, considering.

"Hah! A merchant and a miner, and now ye want to haggle? Alright, what ye proposin'?"

"Ten percent off all shipments, and in return, I buy exclusively from ye. No other grain merchants. Ye got my word."

Ogrik narrowed his eyes.

"Exclusive trade, eh? That's steady coin. Hmmm… fine. Done."

They shook hands, sealing the deal. Another win. Another step toward full control of the trade. As Gorrin returned home, counting his gains, his mind turned back to Goldwell. Goldwell thought he controlled everything. That Gorrin was his servant, his lackey.

Gorrin stood in Goldwell's lavish estate, swirling a fine goblet of wine in his hand, speaking in his smoothest merchant's voice.

"Trade's goin' better than ever, Lord Goldwell. Got a 10% cut on grain prices, suppliers locked in, logistics runnin' smooth. The operation's tight."

Goldwell, dressed in deep crimson noble robes, nodded in approval.

"Good. That’s what I like to hear. Lower prices mean bigger margins."

He gestured toward the five noble dwarves seated in the estate hall, his trade allies, their golden rings gleaming in the firelight.

"Ye should meet my friends, Stonefist. If ye keep this up, ye’ll be dealin’ with the most powerful dwarves in Dumgral’dur."

Gorrin forced a smile, shaking hands with each of them. Lord Thurgrim Stonetide, a merchant lord controlling river trade routes. Lady Helga Ironsong, head of Dumgral’dur’s banking guild. Lord Faldor Deepmantle, an old war veteran with vast land holdings. Master Tholdrin Runeforge, an artificer supplying enchanted tools to the mines. Lord Durvik Steelbrand, a shipbuilder whose cargo vessels moved trade across dwarven lands.

They chatted over wine and roasted boar, exchanging meaningless pleasantries.

But Gorrin had only one real goal tonight.

He waited until the other nobles took their leave, leaving him and Goldwell alone by the great hearth.

Gorrin leaned in slightly, speaking low and confident.

"Goldwell, trade’s better than ever. Ye should see it with yer own eyes. Come to the mines, see how the trade really runs."

Goldwell sipped his wine, considering.

"Hmmm… I’ve left the details to ye so far, but aye. Maybe I should."

Gorrin grinned.

"And while we’re at it, it’s time ye meet the other half of the deal—the Duergar. They’re the reason this whole thing is profitable. Ye should see their city, see how it all fits together."

Goldwell chuckled.

"Aye, I got time. Let’s do it."

A few days later, Goldwell arrived at the mines, dressed in fine travel leathers, clearly eager for a look at the empire he believed he controlled.

As they descended into the ancient tunnels, Goldwell’s eyes widened, taking in the vast dwarven pillars, ancient archways, and stone-carved murals lost to history.

"This is incredible, Stonefist. These halls must be thousands of years old."

Gorrin nodded, his voice calm.

"Aye. Back before Dumgral'dur was what it is today, these tunnels were the first real mines. Dug by our ancestors before they vanished into the deep."

Goldwell ran a hand over a crumbling stone inscription.

"And now, we're usin' them again. Full circle, eh?"

"Aye. Full circle."

They continued the long trek down, the air growing thicker, warmer, and filled with the distant echoes of hammering and deep voices.

Until at last—

They entered the Duergar city.

A sprawling underground metropolis, lit by molten rivers of lava, great black iron forges, and glowing runic stones embedded in the cavern walls.

Goldwell stared in awe.

"By the gods… it's an entire kingdom down here."

Gorrin smiled.

"Aye. And now, ye get to meet its finest traders."

The Bottom Tar tavern was dimly lit, its air thick with smoke and the scent of iron and ale.

Goldwell and Gorrin took a corner table, ordering the infamous Duergar black tar ale—a brew so thick it stuck to the mug.

Goldwell took a sip and coughed violently.

"Hells, this stuff is stronger than dwarven brandy."

Gorrin chuckled.

"Takes gettin' used to."

Then—

Varkrul arrived, flanked by three more Duergar, their expressions unreadable, their red eyes glinting in the firelight.

Goldwell sat up straighter, adjusting his gold-buckled belt.

"Ah, ye must be the deep traders. Pleasure to meet ye. I—"

Before he could finish—

Varkrul reached across the table, grabbed Goldwell by the collar, and plunged a dagger deep into his side.

Goldwell gasped, choking on his own breath.

"Wh—what the hells?!"

Gorrin leaned back, expression cold.

"Nothin' personal, Goldwell. Just trade."

Goldwell struggled, trying to stand, but the other Duergar grabbed him, slamming him down onto the stone floor.

Another blade sank into his ribs, cracking through bone.

"ARGH!—Ye… ye bastard!" Goldwell choked, blood bubbling in his throat.

Varkrul grinned darkly with his deep red eyes flashing.

"Surface dwarves always think they're the ones in control."

He brought his wicked blade down again—this time across Goldwell's throat, nearly severing his head.

Blood pooled out, staining the floor black.

Goldwell's body spasmed, his mouth opening and closing soundlessly, before his limbs went still.

Varkrul wiped his blade clean, glancing at Gorrin.

"That's how ye deal with problems in the Deep, eh?"

Gorrin exhaled slowly, watching the last shudder of Goldwell's corpse.

"Aye. That's how it's done."

The other Duergar dragged the body, lifting it toward a deep chasm at the edge of the city—a bottomless pit where no one would ever find him.

A few moments later—

Goldwell's corpse vanished into the abyss. Never to be seen again. Gorrin had told the Druegar that there is a surface dwarf who wants to destroy the trade and then there will be no more goods for them. They agreed that if Gorrin will bring the dwarf down to the deep they will kill him. Now the job was done.

Gorrin emerged from the deep tunnels, the cool surface air hitting his face as he took a deep breath of freedom.

Goldwell was gone.

And no one suspected a thing.

The trade continued as usual, the supplies flowed, and 3000 gold coins now lined his own pockets.

He walked through the stone-paved streets of Dumgral'dur, his boots clicking against the ground, his cloak trimmed in gold—a wealthy merchant, a nobleman, a power in his own right.

But in the city, rumors were already spreading.

Inside The Black Swan, the air was filled with murmurs and speculation.

A few wealthy traders sat by the bar, speaking in hushed voices.

"Ye hear about Lord Goldwell? Gone without a trace."

"Aye, strange, isn't it? A noble don't just disappear. Not without reason."

"I heard he had dealings with the Thieves' Guild. Maybe they didn't like how he handled his coin."

"Or maybe someone had a reason to make him vanish."

Gorrin sat at his usual table, sipping his ale, listening without a word.

The best part?

No one suspected him.

He was the one collecting the coin for Goldwell.

And now?

He simply kept it.

3000 gold a month.

No oversight. No demands. No greedy hands taking their share.

It was all his.

With Goldwell gone, Gorrin shifted his attention to his other noble connections.

Each week, he arranged meetings with the five noble families he had been introduced to, Lord Thurgrim Stonetide, the merchant lord controlling river trade routes, Lady Helga Ironsong, head of Dumgral'dur's banking guild, Lord Faldor Deepmantle, an old war veteran with vast land holdings, Master Tholdrin Runeforge, an artificer supplying enchanted tools to

the mines, Lord Durvik Steelbrand, a shipbuilder whose cargo vessels moved trade across dwarven lands.

They met at The Black Swan, enjoying rich meals, fine ales, and casual talk—always mixed with trade.

One evening, Gorrin leaned back in his chair, swirling a goblet of dark dwarven wine.

"It’s good to drink with powerful men and women, aye? I’m always lookin’ to strengthen my ties."

Lord Stonetide chuckled, his deep belly shaking.

"Aye, lad. That’s how fortunes are made. By knowin’ the right people, makin’ the right moves."

Lady Ironsong leaned in, her sharp mind ever calculating.

"Ye’ve done well for yerself, Lord Stonefist. With Goldwell gone, there’s opportunity in the air. A shift in power. Tell me, what are ye lookin’ to do next?"

Gorrin grinned.

"Land. I’m in the market for more land."

Lord Deepmantle nodded, stroking his gray beard.

"Smart move. City land’s gettin’ snatched up by greedy hands, but outside Dumgral’dur? There are still plots ripe for the takin’."

Master Runeforge took a deep sip of ale.

"And what would ye do with it? Expand yer trade? Or somethin’ bigger?"

Gorrin rested his arms on the table, voice steady.

"Both. A nobleman without land is just a rich merchant. But land? That gives power, stability, and legacy."

Lord Steelbrand grunted in approval.

"Aye, ye think like a proper lord, Stonefist. If ye’re serious, I can put ye in contact with some landowners lookin’ to sell. Might cost ye, but coin ain’t an issue for ye, is it?"

Gorrin smiled.

"Not at all."

The next morning, Gorrin walked into the Land Manager’s office, his coin pouch heavy.

The clerk, the same balding dwarf who had sold him his last plot of land, grinned as he saw him.

"Ah, Lord Stonefist! Another land purchase today?"

Gorrin nodded.

"Aye. I'm lookin' for good land, outside Dumgral'dur."

The clerk pulled out a fresh set of maps, spreading them across the counter.

"We got several options, my lord. Riverlands, good for farms or mills. Highland plots, good for stone quarries. And some untamed forest land—wild, but valuable if ye clear it."

Gorrin ran his finger over the maps, eyes gleaming.

"Highlands would bring stone for Dumgral'dur's expansion… The river plots would bring water mills, grain production… The forest—hells, that's timber for shipbuilders like Steelbrand."

"I'll take three plots. One in each."

The clerk's eyebrows shot up.

"Three? That's nearly 2000 gold in land purchases."

Gorrin grinned.

"Then ye best write it up quick before the price goes up, aye?"

That night, Gorrin sat alone in his manor, a fire roaring in the hearth.

A goblet of black mountain wine rested beside him.

And before him—three freshly signed land deeds.

He had come a long way from being just a miner.

One brisk morning, Gorrin gathered a group of laborers in the market district, standing atop a stack of stone bricks as the dwarves below listened.

"Listen up! I've got work for sturdy hands and strong backs. Good coin, good conditions, and better yet—long-term work."

Murmurs ran through the crowd of workers, mostly miners, lumberers, and stone cutters looking for a steady job.

A burly dwarf with arms thick as tree trunks, his beard dusted with sawdust, stepped forward.

"Aye, and what kind o' work we talkin', Stonefist?"

Gorrin smiled.

"Three jobs. First, I need lumberers to clear out a good stretch o’ forest on my land. Trees cut, logs processed, planks ready for sale. Lord Steelbrand’s shipyards are always in need."

The lumberers nodded approvingly.

"Second, I’m openin’ a stone quarry in the highlands. I need miners, haulers, and craftsmen to carve up the best granite and limestone in these mountains. Good stone brings good coin."

A few miners grunted in agreement, rubbing their hands together.

"And third—this one’s for farmers and millwrights—I’m buildin’ a watermill at my river plot. We’ll be plantin’ grain, brewin’ good ale, and makin’ the finest flour in Dumgral’dur."

A short, stout dwarf with a thick white beard and a belt full of measuring tools, Master Thrain Millbarrel, stepped up.

"A watermill, ye say? That takes time, good builders, and even better craftsmanship."

Gorrin clapped a hand on his shoulder.

"That’s why I’m hirin’ the best. And I’m payin’ proper. 20 silver a week for yer work, 50 silver for yer expertise."

Thrain stroked his beard, nodding.

"Then I’ll take the job. If we start right away, we’ll have the frame built in two months. The millstones’ll take longer, but I know a good quarry."

Gorrin grinned.

"Aye. And I own that quarry."

The gathered dwarves chuckled, impressed by his foresight.

"So, who’s takin’ up the work?"

More than fifty hands shot up.

His workforce was ready.

A week later, Gorrin stood on his forest land, watching as his hired lumberers swung their axes.

The sharp crack of wood splitting filled the air as massive trees tumbled down, their canopies shaking the earth.

Master Woodcutter Horgun Barkhand, a weathered old dwarf with a scar across his nose, walked up to Gorrin, wiping sweat from his brow.

"We'll have the first shipment of planks ready for ye by the end o' the week. Got a few young lads learnin' to handle the saws proper."

Gorrin nodded.

"Good. I got Steelbrand's shipyard ready to take as much timber as we can process. That means steady work and steady pay."

Horgun grinned.

"Aye, and that means ale in our cups. That's all we care about."

Gorrin laughed, patting him on the back.

"Then keep the saws hummin' and the axes swingin'. We got a fortune to make."

In the highlands, the sounds of pickaxes echoed, as workers dug into the rocky hills, searching for granite, limestone, and marble.

Gorrin stood with his new mine overseer, Durnik Stonejaw, a broad-shouldered dwarf with a thick black beard and a no-nonsense demeanor.

Durnik squinted at the stone walls, running a hand over the rough surface.

"Aye, this is good rock. Real good. We'll be supplyin' fine stone for Dumgral'dur's builders. But we need carts, rails, and horses to get it movin'."

Gorrin nodded, handing him a ledger.

"Already bought the carts. Already got the rails comin' in. Horses'll be here in a week."

Durnik grinned, impressed.

"Hah! Ye don't waste time, do ye?"

Gorrin smiled.

"Time is coin, Durnik. And I got both."

By the river's edge, construction had begun.

The frame of the watermill was being erected, thick wooden beams lifted into place as dwarven builders hammered joints together.

Master Millwright Thrain Millbarrel stood beside Gorrin, watching his workers.

"This river's got a strong current. We'll have the wheel turnin' fast. Flour will be easy to make. But the ale… that's where the real craft is."

Gorrin crossed his arms, nodding.

"Aye. I’m not interested in cheap grain beer. I want proper dwarven ale. Dark, strong, and somethin’ folk will remember."

Thrain grinned.

"Then we’ll need the best grain and the right hands to brew it. I know a few old lads who could set up a proper brewery next to the mill."

Gorrin clapped him on the back.

"Then bring ‘em in. And when the ale is ready, I’ll be the first to take a sip."

With timber being sold, stone being quarried, and a brewery in the making, Gorrin’s income expanded once again.

Gold flowed into his coffers like a river.

And as he sat in The Black Swan one evening, sipping his drink, he realized something.

"I’ve built an empire in the dark."

"Now it’s time to make it shine in the light."

The vaulted halls of Dumgral’dur’s Banking Guild were carved from smooth, polished black stone, their pillars wrapped in golden dwarven script, symbolizing wealth, prosperity, and power.

Gorrin walked through the grand doors, the sound of clinking coins and scratching quills filling the air.

At the head of the chamber sat Lady Helga Ironsong, a sharp-eyed, silver-haired dwarf dressed in deep blue noble robes, her fingers idly tapping a gold inlaid ledger as she studied Gorrin’s approach.

She smiled as he reached her desk.

"Ah, Lord Stonefist. Come, sit. We have trade to discuss."

Gorrin took the seat across from her, leaning forward.

"Aye, Lady Ironsong. I assume ye don’t call in folk just for pleasantries."

Helga chuckled, reaching for a quill and parchment.

"Ye’ve built quite the operation, Gorrin. Trade routes, land, construction, industry. But I know somethin’ about trade—speed is the difference between profit and loss."

She dipped the quill into ink, then began writing out figures on a fresh contract.

"I’m offerin’ ye an opportunity to speed up yer expansion. A private loan—10,000 gold. No guild involvement, no oversight, just coin in hand to push yer empire forward."

Gorrin’s eyebrows lifted slightly.

"That’s a fair sum, Lady Ironsong. What’s the interest?"

Helga smiled, adjusting her gold-rimmed spectacles.

"10% over two years. Paid quarterly. More than fair, considerin’ what yer buildin’."

Gorrin leaned back, stroking his beard.

10,000 gold would triple his workforce overnight, expand his stone mine, build brewery, and sawmill in record time—and with profits rollin’ in, he’d clear the debt before it became a burden.

But debt was debt.

And Lady Helga wasn’t one to forgive a late payment.

Still, he had to think big.

He grinned, picking up the quill and signing his name.

"Done. We’ll make good use of the coin."

Helga nodded approvingly, rolling up the contract and sealing it with a hot wax imprint of her personal crest.

"Then go, Stonefist. Put the gold to work. Make us both richer."

With coin in hand, Gorrin wasted no time.

He hired hundreds more workers, sending messengers to all corners of Dumgral’dur, calling for laborers, craftsmen, foremen, and engineers.

In the Highland Quarry, the once-small mining site roared to life. Hundreds of dwarves now carved through the rock, their pickaxes hammering deep veins of granite and limestone. Mining carts rolled along freshly built rails, carrying tons of stone to surface buyers. A crew of blacksmiths was hired to maintain tools, forge new pickaxes, and reinforce the tunnels. Overseer Durnik Stonejaw shouted orders from atop a ledge, keeping the workers disciplined and on schedule.

Gorrin stood beside him, watching the progress.

Durnik wiped sweat from his brow.

"By the gods, Stonefist. I’ve run mines for decades, but this? This is the finest operation I’ve ever seen."

Gorrin smiled, crossing his arms.

"Aye, and it’s just the start. We’ll be supplyin’ the best stone Dumgral’dur’s seen in a century."

Gorrin rode out to his forested lands, where his hired workers had already cleared massive sections of trees.

Near the river, a brand-new sawmill stood, its large waterwheel turning with the current, driving the cutting blades inside. Stacks of freshly cut planks were piled up for shipment. A team of dwarven sawyers and carpenters worked tirelessly, cutting logs into fine timber for Dumgral’dur’s shipyards and construction projects. Horses and carts were lined up, ready to transport lumber to Steelbrand’s shipwrights.

Master Woodcutter Horgun Barkhand walked up, grinning through his thick, sawdust-coated beard.

"Stonefist, this mill’s a beauty. Ye gave us the coin, and we made damn good use of it."

Gorrin nodded, pleased.

"Aye, and now the gold rolls in. How’s the timber quality?"

Horgun clapped a hand on a stack of planks.

"Best in the mountains. Steelbrand’s shipbuilders are gonna be beggin’ for more."

Gorrin grinned.

"Then let’s make ‘em beg. Double the output. We sell to the highest bidder."

At the river plot, the brewery construction was finished, and the first barrels of ale were being brewed.

Gorrin met with Master Brewer Haldir Stoutmug, a portly dwarf with a nose red from years of taste-testing.

Haldir grinned, holding up a steaming mug of fresh ale.

"First batch, Stonefist. Dark, rich, and strong enough to put an orc on his arse."

Gorrin took a deep swig, feeling the burn of fine dwarven craftsmanship.

"Hah! That’s damn good. We’ll be sellin’ this across Dumgral’dur in no time."

Haldir chuckled, nodding.

"Aye. But good ale needs time to age. This is fresh. The best stuff? Give it a few months, and it’ll be legendary."

Gorrin grinned.

"Then we'll be patient. But not too patient."

One evening, Gorrin was invited to a private gathering by Lord Thurgrim Stonetide, the merchant lord who controlled river trade routes.

They met in a secluded chamber beneath The Black Swan, where another figure awaited them—a man Gorrin had never met before.

A slim, dark-cloaked dwarf with piercing green eyes.

Thurgrim gestured to him.

"Stonefist, meet Korvin Blackshade, Guildmaster of Dumgral'dur's Thieves' Guild."

Korvin smiled, his movements smooth as a shadow.

"A pleasure, Lord Stonefist. Yer name's been whispered in many circles."

Gorrin sat across from him, keeping his expression neutral.

"Aye? And what circles might those be?"

Korvin chuckled.

"The ones that understand power when they see it. Ye built somethin' grand, Stonefist. Trade, land, connections. And connections… well, they mean everything."

Thurgrim poured himself a drink, watching the exchange.

Korvin leaned forward.

"I like workin' with folk who know how to get things done. And from what I hear, ye don't like wastin' time."

Gorrin smiled.

"Aye. Time is coin."

Korvin grinned, raising his mug.

"Then let's drink to both."

The mugs clanked together, and a new alliance was born. Gorrin Stonefist was no longer just a merchant. He was a kingmaker, a force in Dumgral'dur's underbelly. And soon, no one would dare move against him.

It was late evening in Dumgral’dur, the city alive with the glow of forge fires and the chatter of merchants finishing their trade for the day. Gorrin walked through the dimly lit corridors of The Black Swan, led by a hooded figure toward a private chamber beneath the tavern.

Inside, Korvin Blackshade sat at a round stone table, pouring himself a goblet of fine elven wine. The Thieves' Guildmaster had an expression of cool amusement, his green eyes glinting in the flickering candlelight.

"Stonefist. Good to see ye. Take a seat."

Gorrin grunted, lowering himself into the chair across from him.

"Ye don’t send for me unless there’s gold involved, Blackshade. So speak."

Korvin chuckled, swirling his drink.

"Straight to trade. That’s what I like about ye." He leaned forward. "Tell me, Gorrin—how much do ye know about the humans who pass through Dumgral’dur?"

Gorrin raised an eyebrow.

"Enough to know they bring coin, buy up steel, and trade in spices. Some of ‘em make decent deals, some try to rob us blind and others are just visitin the city and living here. What of it?"

Korvin’s smile sharpened.

"They also go missin’ from time to time. And no one up top cares enough to ask questions."

Gorrin sat silent for a moment, watching the shadows dance along the stone walls.

"Ye’re talkin’ about slavers."

Korvin nodded slowly.

"I prefer to call it ‘reallocation of assets.’ But aye, that’s the idea. Some of our lads have been runnin’ a quiet operation for years, but now? The Guild wants to expand. We have the means, we have the men—but we need a market."

He leaned forward, voice dropping lower.

"I hear ye know some folk in the Deep who might be interested. The Duergar, aye? They deal in flesh."

Gorrin exhaled slowly, thinking.

The Duergar were ruthless in their labor systems. The workforce down there was expendable —goblins, orcs, even their own kind—but humans? Humans were strong, adaptable, and they would fetch a higher price than anything the deep dwarves currently had access to.

"Aye. The Duergar slave drivers'll pay well for fresh hands. But they ain't ones to be cheated. If we do this, we do it right. Quality goods. Healthy stock. No half-dead bodies they can't use."

Korvin grinned.

"That's why I came to ye, Stonefist. Yer a trademan. Ye know how to keep a trade clean. We split the coin fifty-fifty, and we both walk away richer than we already are."

Gorrin considered the offer.

"This is another step forward. Another stream of gold flowin' into my hands."

"But it's a dangerous one. Once I start, there's no turnin' back."

After a moment, he reached for his own goblet, clinking it against Korvin's.

"Fine. We'll test it out. But ye better make sure them humans don't start fightin' back. Last thing I need is some foolish rebellion drawin' attention."

Korvin laughed, raising his glass.

"Then it's a deal, Stonefist. Ye won't regret it."

The operation began quietly. Korvin's guild thieves worked the streets, identifying lone travelers, merchants with few guards, and wanderers too foolish to keep their blades close. Each night, a few disappeared from Dumgral'dur's alleys—bundled into carts, their wrists bound in thick iron shackles.

The first shipment of ten slaves was delivered to the old mine entrance, where Snaggit and the goblins awaited. The captured humans—men, women, even a few young lads barely of age—looked around in confusion and fear, their eyes darting between the small, cackling goblins and the dark stone maw of the tunnel.

One of them, a broad-shouldered human with dark hair, turned toward Gorrin, his jaw clenched in defiance.

"You… you don't have to do this. We have coin. We'll pay for our freedom."

Gorrin sighed, shaking his head.

"Aye, and in a perfect world, maybe I'd let ye. But ye ain't got enough coin to match what the Duergar pay."

The human spat at his feet.

"Then you're no better than a damned goblin trader."

Gorrin chuckled, wiping his boot on the dirt.

"Aye? And what's that make ye? A fool who walked into Dumgral'dur thinkin' the world was fair? Ye're a product now. Ye best get used to it."

He nodded to Snaggit, who clapped his hands excitedly.

"Take 'em down. The slave drivers'll be waitin'."

The humans were prodded forward, disappearing into the darkness of the tunnel, their torches casting long, flickering shadows.

Days later, Gorrin traveled back to the Duergar city, meeting with Varkrul and his slave-driving kin.

The Duergar eyed the new human slaves carefully, examining their teeth, muscles, and hands like livestock.

One of them, a scarred overseer named Morvag Blackchoke, nodded in approval.

"These will do. Strong backs, good flesh. They'll break quick, but they'll work before they do."

Gorrin crossed his arms.

"Aye, and the price?"

Morvag grinned, tossing him a pouch of heavy coin.

"200 gold per head. More if ye bring us specialists—smiths, masons, scribes. We got uses for them too."

Gorrin weighed the pouch in his hand.

2,000 gold. Just for one shipment.

He smiled.

"Ye'll get more. So long as the coin keeps flowin'."

Morvag laughed darkly, shaking Gorrin's hand.

"Then we'll be seein' much of each other, Stonefist. And so will they."

He nodded toward the human slaves, who were already being loaded onto wagons, chains rattling.

Some were dragged toward the mines, others forced into cruel harnesses, pulling wagons like beasts while the Duergar drivers cracked whips at their backs.

Gorrin watched without expression.

"More gold. More power."

"The surface dwarves think they rule trade. The Duergar think they rule the Deep. But me?"

"I rule both."

He turned on his heel and walked away, his purse heavier than ever.

The trade empire had taken its darkest turn yet.

Gorrin sat in his stone-carved study, overlooking a ledger stacked with his profits, when the doors swung open.

Lady Helga Ironsong strode in, her long blue noble robes flowing, her gold-rimmed spectacles reflecting the candlelight. Behind her, two armed banking guild guards stood, their hands resting on polished axe handles.

Gorrin didn't need an introduction. He already knew.

The time had come.

Helga sat across from him, placing a rolled contract onto his desk.

"Stonefist. Ye're a hard dwarf to track down. I assume ye know why I'm here?"

Gorrin leaned back, arms crossed.

"Aye. The loan."

Helga smiled, but it wasn't friendly. It was the kind of smile a vulture gives before the feast.

"10,000 gold. Full repayment. Now."

Gorrin gritted his teeth.

"That wasn't the deal, Helga. 10% interest, quarterly payments. We agreed."

Helga's smile widened.

"And the bank has changed its terms. See, I like ye, Stonefist. Ye're ambitious. But that's the problem—ye're getting too ambitious. Too powerful."

She leaned in, her sharp gaze piercing through him.

"So here's the new deal. Pay in full within three days, or the Banking Guild will begin repossessin' yer lands, shops, and assets."

Gorrin felt his hands tighten into fists beneath the desk.

"This was never about the gold."

"This was a trap."

"She wanted to cripple me, to take what I built, to make me another pawn in her game."

Gorrin inhaled slowly, then forced a smile onto his face.

"Fine. I'll come up with a solution. Three days, aye?"

Helga nodded, standing up gracefully.

"Three days. No more."

She turned and walked out, her guards in tow.

Gorrin sat still for a moment, breathing slowly, controlling the rage boiling inside him.

Then he rose from his chair, grabbed his cloak, and left.

There was only one solution.

Deep within the hidden chambers of the Thieves' Guild, Gorrin met Korvin Blackshade, the Guildmaster of Dumgral'dur's underworld.

Korvin sat in his usual seat, sharpening a dagger, the faint smell of pipe smoke curling through the air.

"Stonefist. Always a pleasure. What brings ye here tonight? Trade? Or revenge?"

Gorrin sat down, leaning forward.

"Both. I need Helga Ironsong taken care of. And I need it done quietly."

Korvin arched an eyebrow.

"The head of the Banking Guild? That's a tall order. Mighty expensive, too."

Gorrin slid a pouch of gold onto the table.

"2,500 gold. That enough to make it happen?"

Korvin took the pouch, weighing it in his hands before grinning.

"Aye. That'll do."

Gorrin tapped the wooden table.

"Make sure she doesn't die. I got a special place for her. The old mines."

Korvin chuckled, his green eyes glinting.

"Ye always have a plan, don’t ye, Stonefist? Fine. We’ll take her, and we’ll deliver her where ye want her. Consider it done."

Gorrin stood up.

"Then I’ll be waitin’. And make sure they don’t mess it up."

Korvin nodded, flicking his dagger into the table.

"Trust me. Helga’s about to find out what real debt feels like."

The plan unfolded at night.

Helga left her banking hall as usual, flanked by two guards.

Korvin’s thieves moved like shadows, blending into darkened alleyways until they struck. Crossbows whispered through the air, striking one guard in the head, another in the heart. A hooded dwarf appeared behind Helga, pressing a cloth soaked in alchemical fumes against her mouth. Her eyes widened, her struggles weak, and then—darkness.

By the time anyone noticed, the guards were dead, and Helga was gone.

That night, at the old mine entrance, Gorrin stood in the darkness, waiting.

Soon, a cart rolled up, torches flickering, the Thieves’ Guild delivering their package.

Korvin hopped down, pulling the sack off Helga’s head.

Her eyes blinked blearily, then widened in horror when she saw where she was.

"What… what is this?!" she gasped, struggling. "Stonefist, ye bastard, ye can’t—"

Gorrin grinned coldly.

"Oh, but I can. Ye wanted to take what I built, thought ye’d trap me in debt, take my land, break my name. But instead? Ye’re goin’ to live the life o’ yer dreams—down in the Deep."

Helga’s face twisted in rage.

"Ye can’t do this! The Guild will come for me! The city will—"

Before she could finish, a small, gnarled hand shot out from the darkness.

Snaggit, the goblin, sank his sharp teeth into Helga’s wrist, tearing into her flesh.

She screamed.

The goblin cackled, smacking her across the face.

"No more talks, sssshiny lady. No more goldssss. Just works. Works, worksss, workss!"

The goblins dragged her screaming into the tunnel, deeper and deeper into the darkness.

The air in the underground city of Dumgral'dur was thick with the scent of stone dust and damp iron. The grinding of rusted wheels echoed down the carved basalt streets, but there were no oxen, no mules—only the labored grunts and pained gasps of manflesh, dragging a wagon laden with Duergar goods through the cavernous gloom.

The slaves—ragged humans, their backs lashed raw—staggered forward, iron harnesses clamped onto their jaws, their bodies strapped in layers of hardened leather and chains. Every strained breath came out in ragged wheezes as their bare feet scraped against the cold stone floor. Their shoulders trembled under the weight of the wagon, and yet there was no stopping, not while the whip cracked like thunder.

Morvag Blackchoke sat atop the wagon, his boots resting on the back of a fallen slave, his fingers tapping impatiently against the haft of a cruel barbed whip. His red eyes burned in the dim light, glowing with something akin to satisfaction as he watched his cargo struggle for each step. His armor—blackened iron with dull silver trim—was thick, the plates reinforced like he was always prepared for war, even if the war was against those too weak to fight back.

By the time Helga arrived in the Deep, all her fine noble robes had been stripped from her.

"Hah! Never had a banker before. I wonder if yer hands are any good with a pickaxe." Morvag laughed.

Helga kept her eyes down, her face twisted in a cry.

Morvag's whip cracked across her back, tearing into her skin.

She fell to her knees, gasping.

Morvag grinned.

"Ye belong to the Deep now. And we pay our debts in sweat."

She was dragged away, thrown among the other slaves, where the endless toil of the mines awaited her.

From that day forward, Helga Ironsong, once the most powerful banker in Dumgral'dur, became nothing more than another broken soul beneath the mountain.

And Gorrin? Gorrin walked away richer, untouchable, and freer than ever before.

The golden chandeliers of the Great Hall shimmered with the glow of thousands of candles, their light reflecting off the polished blackstone walls of Dumgral'dur's royal chamber. The air was thick with the rich aroma of roasted meats, aged cheeses, and spiced dwarven wine, filling the hall with a warmth that could make even the coldest hearts soften—if only for a night.

Gorrin sat among the most powerful dwarves of the mountain, his heavy coin pouches clinking softly against his belt of fine leather. He ran a calloused hand over them, feeling the weight of wealth—a weight he had forged in the darkness, through trade, blood, and iron.

At the long stone table, beside him sat Lord Thurgrim Stonetide, the river lord, already deep in his fourth goblet of dark ale, laughing heartily at some merchant's folly. Across the table, the grizzled veteran, Lord Faldor Deepmantle, chewed thoughtfully on a piece of braised venison, his scarred hands tapping against the jeweled hilt of his dagger.

Master Tholdrin Runeforge, ever the craftsman, inspected the enchanted etchings on his silver fork, muttering about the precision of its engravings. Lord Durvik Steelbrand, the shipwright, clinked his golden goblet against Gorrin's with a knowing nod.

"Ye've come far, Stonefist," Durvik murmured, taking a sip. "From the mines to the table o' kings."

Gorrin grinned, his thick black beard glistening with drops of the king's finest dwarven wine.

"Aye. And I plan to stay here." He took a deep gulp, savoring the taste of aged mountain grapes, sweeter than any drink he had before. "Gold flows where the clever guide it."

At the head of the massive table, King Brumli Ironkeep raised his goblet, his crown gleaming beneath the torchlight.

"Tonight, we feast! To Dumgral'dur, to trade, and to the dwarves who built it!"

The hall roared with cheers, tankards raised, plates filled, and the future of the mountain burned bright in the embers of ambition.

And Gorrin Stonefist sat at its heart—richer than ever, drinking with kings.